ELDER NEKTARY

OF OPTINA

by I. M. Kontzevitch

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ELDER NEKTARY OF OPTINA

ELDER NEKTARY OF OPTINA
A rare photograph taken not long after his ordination in 1898.

ELDER NEKTARY
of Optina

by
I. M. KONTZEVITCH

ST. HERMAN OF ALASKA BROTHERHOOD
1998

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Front cover: Icon of St. Nektary of Optina, painted recently by a monk of Optina Monastery and presented to the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood. At the bottom are relics and a bead from the Elder's prayer rope.

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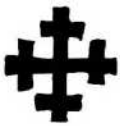

Dedicated to the memory of
an Optina disciple,

FATHER ADRIAN
later Archbishop Andrew
(Rymarenko) (†1978)

on the 20th anniversary of his repose,
and on the 70th anniversary of the repose
of St. Nektary (†1928).

Optina Monastery, with the ferry crossing in the foreground.
Pre-revolutionary photograph taken at the turn of the century.

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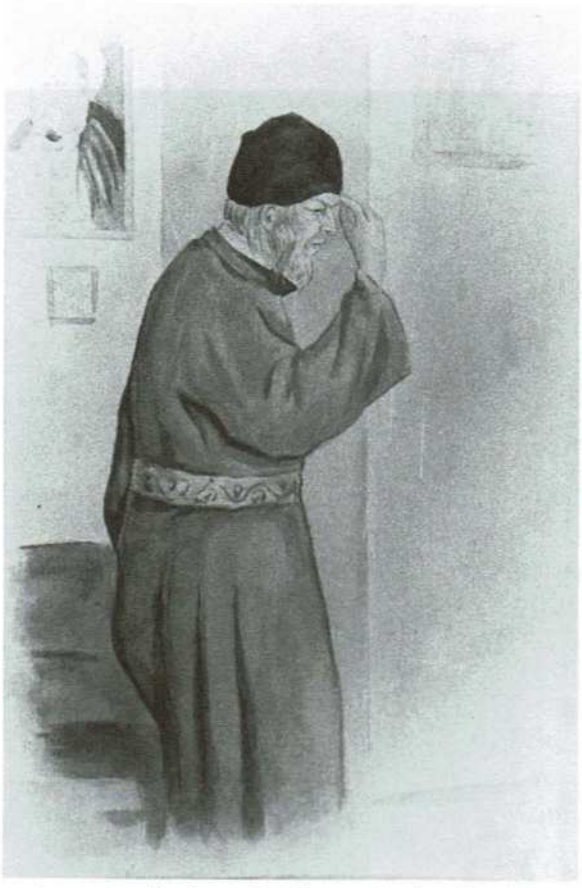
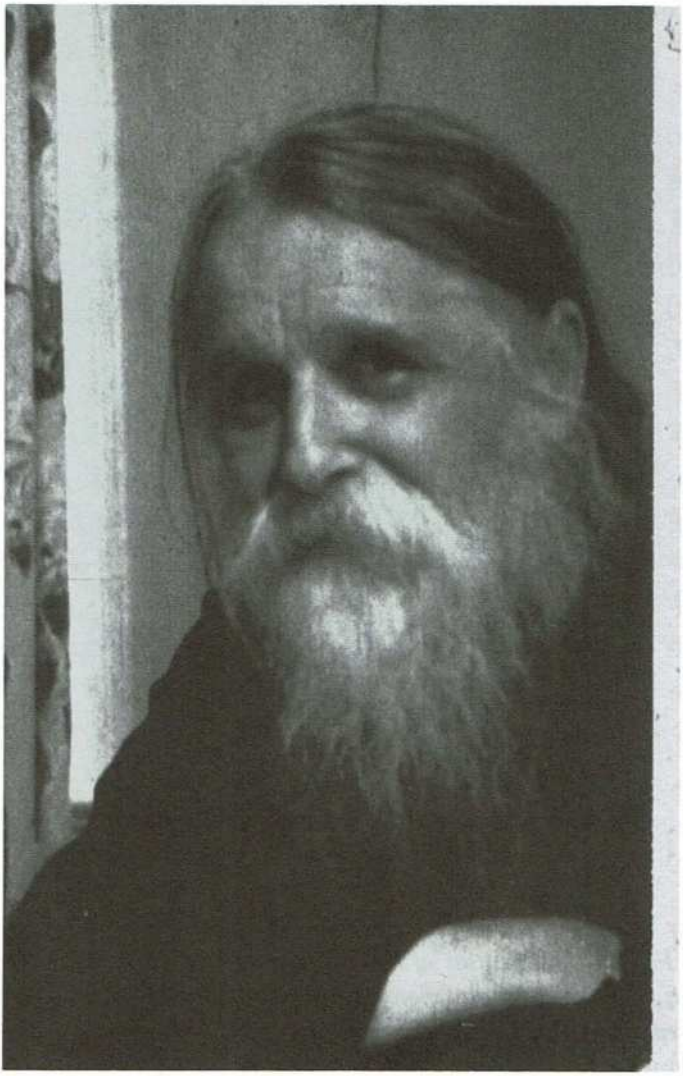


An aquarelle from the Kontzevitch collection.
The following inscription, addressed to
Ivan Kontzevitch, is on the back:

Dear Vanya—

Fr. Nektary, because of his humility, would not allow anyone to paint his portrait or take photographs of him. Once a certain lady artist visited him—God knows her name—when Fr. Nektary came out for the general prayer. And so she, when she saw him, quickly went out and drew a sketch of him from her first impression. From this sketch Batiushka Adrian has a watercolor; and from this portrait the artist Constantine Stepanovich made two watercolors at my request—one for you, and one for me.

July 18, 1946
Gerasim



FATHER ADRIAN (RYMARENKO)
not long before he became a monk. He was later
consecrated Bishop of New Diveyevo, Spring Valley, New York.

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual Continuity

For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: For in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel (I Cor. 4:15).

1. MY SPIRITUAL "GRANDFATHER"

Due to the destruction of Optina Monastery by the bolsheviks, the disciples of the last great Optina Elder, Nektary, were not able to remain attached to that monastic enclosure; they were dispersed across Russia and throughout the world. These humble souls, having been touched by the endearing, Christ-like meekness of Elder Nektary, were nourished for decades on the spiritual food they received through their contact with the Elder. They shared, in their own simple way, the life-emitting awareness of holiness, and made it possible for others to catch that living spark, which has resulted in this book.

One of these lay-disciples was I. M. Kontzevitch, the author of the *Prima Vita* (First Life) of the Elder, which he wrote in France and had published in America in 1952. This small volume, depicting historic events in the life of St. Nektary, was later supplemented by a little book of memoirs of several visits to the Elder by Evgenia Grigorievna Rymarenko. Evgenia was the wife of the priest, Fr. Adrian (later Archbishop Andrew), under

whose epitrachelion (priestly stole) Elder Nektary reposed. A true spiritual son of the Elder, Fr. Adrian would inspire others to follow the monastic path in the Optina tradition.

I am indebted to these men—I. M. Kontzevitch and Fr. Adrian—for the spiritual rebirth I acquired from Elder Nektary, and am hereby witnessing to how the Elder, as my "spiritual grandfather," breathed into me life in Christ—for otherwise I would have ended my life by my own hand. In gratitude to this great Elder, and as an expression of our spiritual lineage from him, we present here this hagiographical monograph.

2. MY SPIRITUAL FATHER

I was spiritually dead, angry at a world full of war and hatred. I had been deprived of my father, my fatherland, and my own dignity. As a child of World War II, I grew up with more than my share of traumatic experiences; the struggle for mere existence was the major preoccupation of those around me. Coming across the ocean to the affluent pluralism of America, having been already shaken in my spiritual roots, I could not be content with mere material values. Neither my high school nor the early stages of college could offer anything to heal the festering wounds of my soul.

Almost at the height of my suicidal intensity, I was unworthily brought to a monastic setting where God's mercy placed into my hands this *Prima Vita* of Elder Nektary. It was given to me by a monk, Fr. Vladimir, who was the direct disciple of Elder Nektary's spiritual son, Fr. Adrian. It was one of the very first spiritually charged texts that my soul encountered, and there I met the striking personality of the Elder. Immediately thereafter, I immersed myself in the accounts of the visits of Fr. Adrian's wife to Elder Nektary in Optina. These two potent documents led me to the disciple himself (Fr. Adrian), who immediately took me under his wing. With Apostolic power, Fr.

Adrian breathed into me his love for Optina and his filial kinship with Elder Nektary, thereby connecting me to my "spiritual grandfather," who transformed my sinful ignorance and, as if through an umbilical cord, made me his conscious, eager disciple. Before this encounter I did not even have knowledge of the Gospels, and I was not connected to the Church's liturgical services. My life was returned to me through Elder Nektary. He was my first "spiritual hero," my first initiator into the realm of spiritual life, my judge, and the captain of my soul.

I became a spiritual son of Fr. Adrian, whose wife was very generous in providing me with opportunities to spend a lot of time with him during my frequent visits. Eventually, with his blessing I embarked upon theological studies in a seminary, where I. M. Kontzevitch had been a professor and where I met Kontzevitch's brother, the future Bishop Nektary, who from childhood had been raised as a spiritual son of Elder Nektary. Bishop Nektary later became my instructor in monasticism and ordained me a hieromonk.

During my seminary days I dreamed of one day presenting a biography of Elder Nektary in the English language. For years I waited for more information to seep through the Iron Curtain. At that time Godliness was being ruthlessly uprooted in Russia, and there seemed hardly any possibility of acquiring more information on Optina. Furthermore, it was known that in Paris, book peddlers were scattering the stolen, precious Optina Monastery library in an attempt to make money, not knowing the value of the rare treasures they were discarding.

I would gather bits and pieces from whoever had visited Optina; and eventually, with the help of the widow of Professor Kontzevitch, we were able to produce a preliminary gathering of Optina data, *Optina Monastery and its Era,* published in 1975. On his deathbed my dear Professor Kontzevitch implored me to help his wife to publish his trilogy on Optina,

Professor I. M. Kontzevitch and his wife Helen in front of their icon corner and books from Optina Monastery, which were being sold in Paris after the plunder of Optina. Paris, 1950.

which included the aforementioned *Prima Vita,* and to make it available to the English-speaking world. "It is my last wish," he added, "that you will make these Optina texts available to the younger generation." It was to our magazine, *The Orthodox Word,* and our Brotherhood that he bequeathed his library, his papers, and his hopes.

In the meantime, I frequently implored Fr. Adrian to give me more information on Elder Nektary, but to no avail. Fr. Adrian wrote to me, describing in brief his first visit to Optina with a group led by Fr. John Egorov:

Dear Batiushka Father Herman,

You are giving me an absolutely impossible commission: "to give you Father Nektary"—to give you not just his life story, but precisely that transcendence of life which we experienced, being in communion with Batiushka Father Nektary. So that you will understand what I am saying, I will tell you what happened to us, students of the Christian Fellowship in Petersburg, when we, disillusioned with interconfessionalism, were seeking Orthodoxy. We turned to Professor John Egorov and asked him to tell us what Orthodoxy was. Then Elder Nektary smiled and said, "Orthodoxy is life; one cannot talk about it, one must live it." In the same way I will tell you: In order to give you the full Batiushka Nektary, one must be in the same spiritual state in which Evgenia Grigorievna was, who in her memoirs did "give" (present) our Batiushka. To describe the everyday life of the Elder? —It has already been written by Kontzevitch. And to give the correct characteristics of his personality? —It is hard for me to do so now. In order to do all that by myself I need my memory, which has becomed weakened; and I am afraid to make a standard portrait of a man who for us was the image of "Light Invisible." Bishop Nektary described various incidents which took place in the Kontzevitch family. But it*

* I.e., Fr. Adrian's wife.

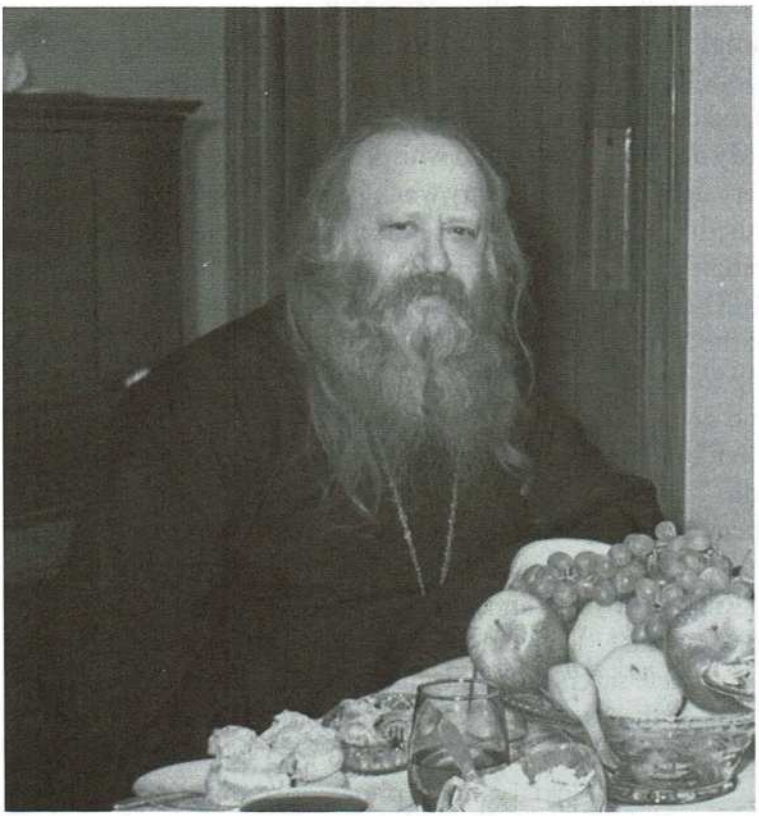
was Evgenia Grigorievna who portrayed his image as it was. Do not be sad! May Christ protect you.

Archbishop Andrew
May 10/23, 1977

Then God had mercy, and from under the rubble of the communist-implanted nightmare, Fr. Adrian received a brief biography from a woman he had known well in Russia while with Elder Nektary, Nadezhda Pavlovich, who camouflaged her authorship by using a pseudonym. He wrote to me: "Finally, I am happy to be able to send you this biographical account. I have read it carefully, and it is a truthful picture. I have made some corrections."

When for the last time I visited my beloved Fr. Adrian and we both knew that this visit would be our last encounter, he, being already close to his demise, opened his heart to me as never before. He revealed to me the greatness of Elder Nektary, as he himself had beheld him in Uncreated Light. He told me:

"Once during a week of Great Lent, that of the Last Judgment, I came to the Elder. He told me to prepare for Confession and indicated to me to read the Gospel. Standing by the analogion I began to read aloud. The Elder went to his cell and the door remained half-open. Behind it I could hear the soft steps of the Elder, who was quietly shuffling back and forth. When he became quiet and I finished the reading, I looked up at the Elder behind the door and cried aloud. The Elder was all on fire; he was encircled by shining, brilliant violet light a foot wide. As soon as I cried out, everything at once disappeared. It must have been that the Elder was in a prayerful state as the Gospel was being read. This supernatural phenomenon was given me to behold with simple eyes, in order to strengthen me in the forthcoming trials which the Elder was about to place on me."



Bishop Nektary (Kontzevitch), at the time he tonsured us.

3. MY CONFESSING BISHOP

Bishop Nektary was our other link with Elder Nektary. His perpetual admonitions to our Brotherhood were drawn from Elder Nektary's teachings on seeking sobriety and guarding against spiritual delusion. The Bishop's assessment of contemporary spiritual seekers was that they were on a superficial, albeit sincere, quest for a "quick-fix" of spirituality. Often he would refer to anecdotes from the life of Elder Nektary, regretting that

a true image of the Elder's personality could not be rendered in simple language, especially if the recipient was not aware of what Holy Russia was all about. He would deeply sigh, placing his hand on his heart, and his sky-blue eyes would brim with tears. "My dear ones," he would whisper, "how heart-rending was the very sight of Elder Nektary when he, after a long absence, would quietly shuffle into the reception room packed with grieving people eager to hear the minutest, treasurable words from him. And he, with his eyes half-closed, would slowly turn to the icon of the Mother of God hanging in the corner of his humble waiting room, and slowly lift his hand, make the sign of the Cross and say with deep contrition, 'Help us, save us, and keep us, O God, by Thy grace.'" And the grieving Bishop with a sigh would add, "Those were the happiest moments in my life, and I wish them to be a source of equal happiness for you, too."

This image—of the Elder's concentrated prayer before blessing his visitors and solving their dilemmas and lifting their spirits—was affixed in the loving hearts of many who knew him. There were several attempts made by artists to capture this moment of the Saint's prayer. The author's sister, Vera Michailovna, who travelled from Russia with her younger brother, the future Bishop Nektary, made photocopies of these artistic renderings, the first of which was made by Leo Bruni (see p. 427).

Bishop Nektary was by nature a meek person, but in spirit a man of conviction and a confessor. He spent his whole long life under the shadow of the protection of his spiritual mentor, even being named after him in monasticism. Several years after his righteous death in 1983, a group of American converts opened a chapel dedicated to his patron just around the corner from the house in which he had lived for thirty years in San Francisco. In this chapel is located a large icon depicting the opening of St. Nektary's relics, which actually took place ten years after the chapel was built.

Upon the death of Professor Kontzevitch's wife Helen in 1989, we inherited a little paper icon with St. Nektary's signature barely legible on the back. This we treasure as a blessing of the Elder from the other world.

4. A CONFESSIVE BOOK

This book is published on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the blessed repose of Elder Nektary and the 20th anniversary of the repose of his disciple and my spiritual father, Fr. Adrian. It consists, in addition to the *Prima Vita,* of all available information on the Elder from both Russia and abroad.

It was the wish of Fr. Adrian, Bishop Nektary, Professor and Mrs. Kontzevitch, and all those who knew Elder Nektary and the Optina spirit, that the reader would penetrate deeply into the significance of the whole Optina experience of which Elder Nektary is just one pinnacle, and would not jump to conclusions, baffled by the obscure ways of the Elder's foolishness-for-Christ, nor dare to take the Elder as a model. They wished that the reader would humbly stand at a distance from the Elder in awe, and not measure him according to our warped, crude apprehension of reality.

We might be severely damaged if we, insensitive as we are, attempt to outwardly imitate holiness. On the contrary, we ought, with simplicity of spirit, to thank God that He has raised up the glorious phenomenon of the Optina Elders. And we should be grateful that their faithful disciples, who observed them in the minutest detail, have rendered for us as accurately as possible the spiritual image of these true saints, which their eyes were vouchsafed to behold.

Abbot Herman
Pascha, 1998

A symbolic representation of St. Nektary's coffin-reliquary, painted by an American nun for the first chapel dedicated to Elder Nektary several years before his canonization. The chapel is located in San Francicso, two blocks from Bishop Nektary's residence of thirty years.

Chronology

1853 Nicholas Vasilievich Tikhonov is born to Basil and Elena Tikhonov in the city of Elets in the Orel province.

1873 April 27. Enters the Skete of St. John the Forerunner in Optina Monastery.

1876 April 3. Tonsured as a riassaphore monk.

1887 March 14. Tonsured into the mantia.

1894 January 19. Ordained hierodeacon.

1898 October 21. Ordained hieromonk.

1907 April 3. Awarded the nabedrennik.

1911 May 6. Temporary designation as skete Superior and confessor of the brotherhood.

1912 April 17. Confirmation as Elder and Confessor of the Brotherhood.

1915 May 6. Awarded a pectoral cross.

1920 March 18. Designation as skete Superior.
April. Tonsured into the schema.

1923 April. Arrest. Exile to farm at Plokhino. Move to the village of Kholmishche in the Bryansk province.

1928 April 29. Repose in Kholmishche.

1935 Grave dug up and relics found incorrupt.

1989 July 3. Uncovering of holy relics and their translation to Optina Monastery.

1990 April 30. Glorification, outside of Russia, of all the Elders of Optina .

1996 June 13. Local canonization, in Optina Monastery, of all the Optina Elders by the Moscow Patriarchate.

Icon of St. Nektary, painted in Optina before his canonization, containing relics and a knot from his prayer rope. Presented by Abbot Benedict of Optina Monastery to the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood.

Troparion, Tone 1

In being blessed with childlike simplicity and humility, * thy virtuous soul did attract the grace of God. * Thy mind and heart illumined by the Creator, * thou couldst peer into the secrets of His creation, * lighting for all the path that leads unto His Kingdom, * O our holy Father Nektary of Optina. * Glory to Him Who hath bestowed on thee His wisdom; * glory to Him Who hath restored man's original likeness in thee; * glory to Him Who hath taught us of Himself through thee.

PART I

The PRIMA VITA of Elder Nektary of Optina

By I. M. Kontzevitch

Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy.... But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort (I Cor. 14:1, 3).

The author, I. M. Kontzevitch, seen here as a young man in a White Army uniform, at the time he visited Optina and became Elder Nektary's lay disciple.

Hieroschema-monk Nektary, The Last Optina Elder

by I. M. Kontzevitch

1. THE DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT OF ELDERSHIP

The Apostle Paul enumerates three ministries in the Church, independent of the church hierarchy: apostles, prophets and teachers.

Immediately after the apostles stand prophets (Eph. 4:11, I Cor. 12:28). Their ministry consists primarily in *edification, exhortation, and comfort* (I Cor. 14:3). With precisely this aim, and also for pointing out or warning, prophets also predict future events.

Through the prophet, the will of God is immediately revealed; and therefore his authority is limitless.

The prophetic ministry is a special gift of grace, a gift of the Holy Spirit (charism). The prophet possesses a special spiritual vision—clairvoyance. For him the boundaries of space and time are, as it were, set aside; with his spiritual gaze he sees not only the events that are occurring now, but also future events. He sees their spiritual meaning; he sees the soul of a man, his past and future.

Such a high calling cannot but be bound up with a high moral level, with purity of heart, with personal sanctity. Sanctity of life, indeed, was required of the prophet from the first period of Christianity: "He must have the manner of the Lord. From his manner may be distinguished the false prophet and the (true) prophet," says one of the oldest works of Christian literature, the *Didache (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles).**

The ministries enumerated by the Apostle Paul have been preserved in the Church in all ages. The ministries of apostle, prophet and teacher, being independent, may be combined with the rank of bishop or priest.

The prophetic ministry, bound up with personal sanctity, has flourished when spiritual life in the Church was high, and has declined in decadent periods. Most brightly of all is it manifested in monastic eldership. Being a direct continuation of the prophetic ministry, eldership appeared under this name and in this form only in the fourth century, together with the arising of monasticism as its guiding principle.

Let us dwell on this in more detail.

Professor Smirnov, in his doctoral dissertation, *The Spiritual Father in the Ancient Eastern Church,* indicates that "the charismatic phenomena of the first centuries of Christianity repeated themselves in ancient monasticism; that the elders were bearers of these charisms—the special gifts of the Holy Spirit, given to man directly from God, according to one's personal worthiness." "Spiritual writers have set forth an extremely exalted point of view on monasticism. An ascetic is ideally a God-bearing and Spirit-bearing being, a god. As such

* K. Popov, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (Kiev, 1884), p. 19. Professor K. Popov, who wrote a special study on this document, attributes it to the end of the first century, i.e. during the age of the Apostles. Thanks to this document, we have found out much about the life of the Church of the first Christians.

he receives spiritual gifts, an outpouring of which distinguished the first era of Christianity. The gifts of prophecy, casting out demons, healing sicknesses and resurrecting the dead are not exceptional. They only disclose a normal step in the spiritual growth of a monk." The mystery of Confession and spiritual treatment by a confessor was likewise considered to be a grace-filled gift, the gift of *discerning of spirits* (I Cor. 12:10). It was not bound up with the hierarchical rank of bishop or priest, but was acquired with the tonsure into the schema.

In the first quarter of the ninth century in the Patriarchate of Constantinople even simple monks, or so-called "spiritual fathers," were officially recognized by the Orthodox Patriarch as bearers of the apostolic "power of the keys," on the same level with bishops and priests. Though this was a temporary measure, necessitated by circumstances until the next council, as far as is known it was not rescinded.*

From monk-disciples there was demanded total obedience to elder-instructors: "If one has faith in another, and submits himself to him, he does not need to attend to the commandments of God, but must commit his will to his father, and he will not be guilty before God."**

He who commits himself entirely to the guidance of a true elder experiences a special feeling of joy and freedom in the Lord. Even the writer of these lines has experienced this personally. An elder is a direct transmitter of the will of God. Contact with God is always combined with a feeling of spiritual freedom, joy and indescribable peace in the soul. Contrary to this, a false elder overshadows God with himself, putting his own will in the place of God's will. This is accompanied by a

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* S.I. Smirnov, *The Spiritual Father in the Ancient Eastern Church,* part 1, Sergiev Posad, 1906.

** Ignatius Brianchaninov, vol. 4, St. Petersburg, 1860, p. 92.

An old postcard, popular among pilgrims, showing Optina Monastery towering over the Zhizdra River. A scene beloved by Elder Nektary.

feeling of slavery, oppression and, almost always, despondency. Moreover, when a disciple has total reverence for a false elder, "his personality is destroyed and his will is buried," his sense of justice and truth becomes distorted, and thus, "his consciousness is weaned away from responsibility for his actions."*

Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov speaks thus about false eldership: "It is a terrible thing to take upon oneself the responsibilities (of eldership), which can be carried out only by order of the Holy Spirit, while he has still not broken his association with satan, and his vessel has not yet ceased to be defiled by the activity of satan (that is, he has not yet attained passionlessness). Such hypocrisy and play-acting is a terrible thing. It is destructive for oneself and for one's neighbors; it is criminal before God, and blasphemous."**

The influence of eldership has spread far beyond the bounds of monastery walls. Elders have spiritually fed not only monks, but lay people as well. Possessing the gift of clairvoyance, they have *edified, exhorted, and comforted* (I Cor. 14:3) all, have healed them of spiritual and bodily sicknesses, have warned them against dangers, and have indicated to them the path of life, revealing the will of God.***

In Russia, in recent times, eldership flowered especially in Optina Monastery.

Living images of the Optina Elders are given to us in their biographies. But a biography of the last of them—Elder Nektary—has not existed up to now, although this year (1953) is the twenty-fifth anniversary of his repose. Wishing to mark this

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* Ibid.

** Ibid.

***See the chapter on eldership in *The Acquisition of the Holy Spirit in Ancient Russia,* St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, Ca., 1988, chap. 7, pp. 63-76.

jubilee year, we are making an attempt to reproduce his traits and characteristics here.

The lives of Fr. Nektary's predecessors were compiled, immediately after their death, by close ones and disciples, amid peaceful circumstances, when everything was still fresh in the minds of their contemporaries, when information was easy to obtain. We find ourselves under different conditions, far from our homeland, and have a scant number of fragmentary sources of information at our disposal.

Let this work serve as material for a future compiler of the life of this great Elder.

In addition, in beginning the biography of Batiushka Nektary, we warn the reader—whoever has not personally seen Batiushka, cannot, by making use of accounts, picture him clearly. It will be difficult for him to judge concerning his character, concerning Batiushka's qualities—humility, meekness and modesty.

According to several accounts, one who has not seen Batiushka can carry away an incorrect impression of him, as of a jovial and jesting fellow which, in reality, he was not, nor could he have been. Rare instances of his "joviality" were extremely singular and difficult to transmit. They can be reproduced only relatively, since one cannot transmit on paper the intonation of his voice, the gaze of his moist eyes, his modest smile, or his other grace-filled expressions, which were characteristic of him alone, of our dear Batiushka.

It is impossible to transmit his wondrous qualities—his embodiment of humility, his extraordinary meekness and modesty, his love, and all the indescribable endearment of his grace-filled personality.

2. YOUTH AND THE PERIOD BEFORE HIS ELDERSHIP

There are no precise indications as to the year of Fr. Nektary's birth. One may suppose that he was born in about the year 1856.* Fr. Nektary reposed on April 29/May 12, 1928, in the village of Kholmishche, having reached the age of 75.

His parents, Basil and Helen Tikhonov, were residents of the city of Livna, in the Orel province. The future Elder was born in the city of Elets. His father was a foreman; according to another version he worked in a mill. He died early; Fr. Nektary himself spoke about this: "This was in my childhood, when I lived at home, together with my mother. In the whole wide world there were only the two of us, Mama and me, and there was also a cat that lived with us.... We were of a low estate and because of this we were poor; who needs people like that?"

Having buried his mother while still in his youth, now totally orphaned, Nicholas (that was Fr. Nektary's name in the world) was drawn to Optina Monastery, which was located relatively close to his birthplace and which was then already renowned in all corners of Russia. He set out on his way in 1873, at the age of twenty, carrying with him only a Gospel in a knapsack on his back.

The young Nicholas Tikhonov drew near to Optina Monastery, situated on the right bank of the beautiful river Zhizdra at the edge of an age-old pine forest. The sight alone of the Monastery calms and grants peace to the soul and tears one away from the vanity of worldly life. An even greater impression is made by the Skete, to which one must walk along a forest path in the midst of centuries-old pines. In the Skete Nicholas awaited his meeting with Elder Ambrose, who was then at the zenith of his glory.

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* It is now known that he was born in 1853.—Ed.

We present here the words of E. Poselyanin who, though he visited the Optina Skete much later, was still able to meet with Elder Ambrose, and can therefore pass on to us something comparable to that which Nicholas Tikhonov must have seen and felt in the moment we are describing:

On the wall of the Skete you are met by frescoes of the stern faces of the great desert-dwelling saints, holding in their hands unfurled parchments with various sayings from their ascetic works....You walk along a little road paved with flagstones to the wooden skete church. On both sides carefully cultivated flowers bloom on their tall stems, vividly displaying themselves and exuding their sweet fragrance.

To the right and left of the entrance, built into the wall, stand two small, almost identical houses, each having two porches, one on the inside of the Skete and one on the outside. In one of them lived the great Elder Ambrose and in the other, the skete Superior, Fr. Anatole.

The Skete presents itself as a spacious, pleasant garden which shelters within itself, near the wall, small wooden cells, most of which are covered with white stucco.

It is good here in the Skete on a bustling summer afternoon, when the flowers reach out towards the sun and pour forth their fragrance, the busy bees painstakingly hovering over them, and the warmth of the sun streams down, streams in waves upon the quiet Skete.

It is good on a moonlit night, when it seems as if the stars from heaven silently speak with the Skete, sending it news of God. And the Skete in stillness answers them with a sigh sent heavenward, to the eternal, promised abode.

It is also good on a clear wintry day, when everything gleams with pure snow, and the unfading green of the coniferous trees cuts brilliantly across the snow....

Elder Ambrose as he looked to the young Fr. Nektary.

It reminds one of far-off, happy years, of the first encounter with Elder Ambrose on a summer evening.

Here he comes, strolling, stooped over, leaning on a crutch; and the people rapidly approach him. There are short explanations: "Batiushka, I want to go to Odessa—I have relatives there and the work there pays very well."

"Odessa's not for you. Don't go there."

"But Batiushka, I've already prepared everything for the trip."

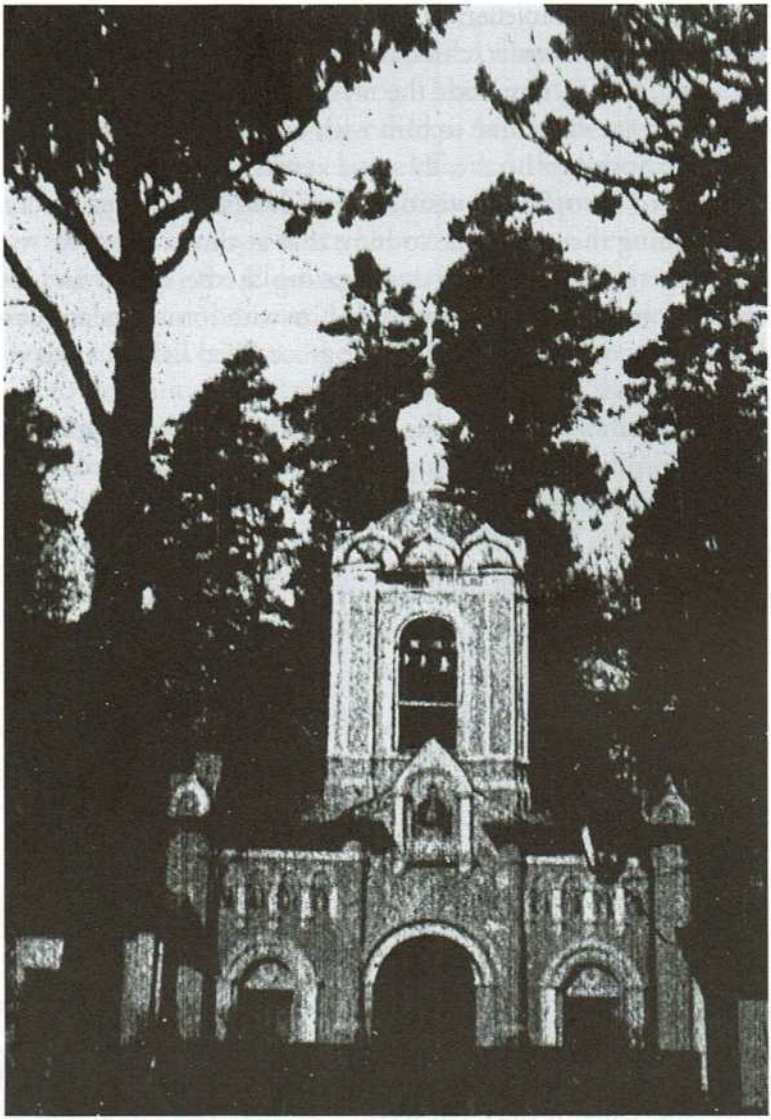
"Don't go to Odessa—how about Kiev, or Kharkov?"

And that is the end of it. If a person is obedient, his life is set.

Some men from afar off are standing there. "Who are you?" asks the Elder in his weak, kind voice.

"We've come to you, Batiushka, with a little present," they reply, bowing. "We're from Kostroma and we've heard that your feet hurt, so we've woven you some moccasins.... "

With what a joyful, elated feeling you enter the cramped cell—hung with icons, portraits of spiritual people, and lampadas—and see, lying on a hard cot, covered with a white woven blanket, Fr. Ambrose. He nods his head affectionately, smiles, tells some sort of joke, and with his glance alone works something miraculous in your soul. It is as if there is a living, mighty sun before you, who warms you, whose rays steal into the depths of your soul, into the secret evil corners of your soul, and banish all that is dark and filthy, multiplying all that is good and pure within you. And often in something, in a casually spoken word, you feel that he has profoundly comprehended your entire nature. And often later, after many long years, you would remember the Elder's wise words of warning. How he could gaze into you; how, without words, he could take in your whole being at a glance.... He worked miracles, unseen and unheard. He sent the sick to some healing spring or other, or directed



The holy gates of the Forerunner Skete, set in a thick pine forest. This forest was entirely cut down, leaving no trace of the trees.

them to serve a Moleben to a saint, and they recovered.... He comes to mind as quiet, clear, simple and joyous in his ceaseless suffering, as if setting aside the rays of his holiness so as to not disconcert us who come to him with our burdens and sins. Indeed, in those days he already stood at such a height, that he appeared to people in visions hundreds of miles away, summoning them to come to him; that at times, when he was listening to the divine services, gazing at the icons, and by chance someone would come up to him with some urgent question, they would be blinded by the grace-filled light that shone from his face.

And such a man strove only to be a kind, amiable grandfather, ingenuously conversing with you about both your big questions and small matters!...

* * *

In such a way the newly arrived youth also must have perceived the sanctity and spiritual beauty of Elder Ambrose. Being of a sound and straightforward nature, he devoted himself to him with his whole being. The entire world for him was focused in Elder Ambrose.

Concerning the first steps of the young novice Nicholas we are able to say only a little, from the words of Nun Nektaria,* whose notes we have at our disposal.

"Nicholas arrived at the Skete with only a Gospel in his hands, a twenty-year-old youth, distinguished by his good looks. He had beautiful bright red lips. For humility the Elder began to call him 'Lip-smacker.'" He lived for fifty years in the Skete (from 1873-1923). He bore a variety of obediences, among which was singing on the cliros. "He had a wonderful voice and when it once fell to him to sing 'The Good Thief,' he sang it so beautifully that he surprised himself—was that

* The author's own mother, tonsured by Elder Nektary.—Ed.

really him singing? (The Elder himself related this to the nun.) The best singers were transferred from the Skete to the Monastery—so he, having sung 'The Good Thief,' became frightened and began to sing off-key. At first they transferred him from the right cliros to the left, and then they removed him altogether and gave him a different obedience."

"He was very shy—when he was assigned to be in charge of the flowers and the Elder sent him together with the nuns to plait garlands for the icons, he blushed and did not look at them. He had a small weakness—he loved sweets. The Elder permitted him to come into his cell and take sweets from his shelf that were placed there on purpose for him. Once the cell-attendant hid the Elder's dinner in this pre-arranged place. The Elder called for his dinner, but the shelf was empty! 'That Lip-smacker ate my dinner,' the Elder explained to the surprised cell-attendant. Once the young novice became sad, that here all the monks received packages from their relatives, but he had no one to send him anything. The nuns found out about this and made jam, bought some sweets, and sent him a little package by mail. Nicholas was overjoyed, grabbed the postal notice, and ran in delight from cell to cell showing that he, too, had a package."

Two years after Nicholas entered the Skete an order was issued by the authorities to dispatch all the novices that were in the Monastery illegally and who were subject to be drafted. Elder Nektary himself related, "Among others, the monastery secretary announced to me that I would be sent from the Skete. But, to my good fortune, by the prayers of the Elder (Ambrose), the danger passed me by. The secretary soon told me that I had escaped the draft by only twenty-five days. I came to Batiushka and thanked him for his prayerful help, and he said to me, 'If you will live like a monk, then in the future no one will trouble you and you'll always remain in the monastery.' And the Elder's words proved to be correct."

Elder Anatole I (Zertsalov) of Optina.

"When Fr. Nektary had the obedience of altar-attendant, his cell opened into the church. He lived in that cell for twenty-five years, not conversing with any of the monks—he only ran to the Elder or to his confessor and back. He did his work perfectly, no matter what obedience he bore, and everything he had was always in good condition. At night a light could constantly be seen in his cell—he was either reading or praying. But during the day he was often caught sleeping, and they formed the opinion about him that he was a sleepyhead and a sluggard. He did this, of course, out of humility."

And so, Fr. Nektary spent twenty-five years in the *podvig* of almost total silence. Who was his real elder—Fr. Ambrose or, as the now-reposed Archpriest S. Chetverikov (*Optina Hermitage*) maintains, Fr. Anatole Zertsalov?* Fr. Nektary answers that question himself. From his words, presented below, his relationship to these great people can be seen: he names Fr. Anatole as his "spiritual father," but his "Elder" was Fr. Ambrose exclusively.

"I entered the Skete in 1873. A year after this Batiushka Ambrose blessed me to turn to the skete Superior, Hieromonk Anatole, as my spiritual father, which I continued

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* Archpriest Chetverikov is mistaken when he says that after Fr. Ambrose, "eldership, though it was not extinguished, did not have its former power and glory" (*Optina Hermitage*). This error is also repeated, from his words, by contemporary hagiographers, among whom is Prof. Igor Smolich, in his extensive work in German, *Russisches Moenchtum*, 1953, Wurzburg.

The last Elders also possessed all the power and fullness of this grace-filled gift. One will be convinced of this if only one becomes acquainted with the biography of Elder Joseph, the immediate disciple and successor of Fr. Ambrose. The fullness of "glory" and the unshakable authority among believers was possessed also by the other Elders, such as Fr. Barsanuphius, about whom our hagiographers are almost silent, as well as Fr. Nektary, of whom we are speaking here. It was not the "power and glory" that diminished, but the number of believers.

to do until the latter's repose in 1894. I turned to Elder Ambrose only on rare and exceptional occasions. In so doing I nourished great love and faith towards him. It would happen that I would come to him and, after a few words from me, he would uncover all the depths of my heart, solve all my perplexities, grant peace to me and console me. The solicitude and care for me, the unworthy one, on the part of the Elder astonished me, for I realized that I was unworthy of it. To my question about this, my spiritual father, Hieromonk Anatole, replied that the reason for this was my faith and love towards the Elder; and if he did not relate to others with such love as he did towards me, this proceeded from their lack of faith and love towards the Elder, and that this was a general rule: however a person related towards the Elder, precisely thus did the Elder relate to him."*

An elder and his activity are not subject to the judgment of his disciple. His directions must be received without any arguments. Therefore even defending the elder is forbidden, since this already in some sense constitutes a deliberation or judgment. Due to his lack of experience, Fr. Nektary defended his Elder, Fr. Ambrose, from the verbal attacks of certain senseless and impudent brothers. After one such argument, his clairvoyant confessor Fr. Anatole appeared to him in a dream (this was while he was still alive) and said threateningly, "No one has the right to discuss the actions of the Elder, being guided by his own foolishness and impertinence. An elder gives an account for his actions to God; we cannot comprehend their meaning."**

Let us say a few words about the skete Superior, Fr. Anatole. According to the words of Fr. Pimen, Superior of the

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* Agapit [Belovidov], Archimandrite, *Biography of Optina Elder Hieroschema-monk Ambrose,* Moscow, 1900, p. 134.

** Ibid.

Nikolo-Ugresh Monastery (who has left behind valuable notes),* during Fr. Ambrose's lifetime Fr. Anatole Zertsalov shared in Fr. Ambrose's labors in the realm of eldership. He was from among the seminary students that labored in the translations of patristic texts during Fr. Macarius' time, together with Fr. Ambrose and Fr. Clement Sederholm. "From the year 1874, Fr. Anatole was made confessor of the whole brotherhood and skete Superior. Almost all visitors who came to Elder Ambrose for a blessing came for a blessing and counsel likewise to Fr. Anatole. He was the Elder both of several of the brothers of the Monastery and Skete, and of the majority of the sisters of the Shamordino Community," as Fr. Pimen informs us. And there is more! "He was so dedicated to mental prayer that he left behind all material cares, though he bore the title of skete Superior." After Fr. Ambrose's repose (in 1891), Fr. Anatole was the Elder of the whole brotherhood. He reposed on January 25, 1894, at the age of 72.

The direct disciple of Fr. Anatole was Fr. Barsanuphius (†1913), who had been a colonel in the world and who had arrived at Optina when Fr. Ambrose was already in his grave. Elder Barsanuphius possessed great spiritual gifts and spent not a few years in seclusion.

After Fr. Barsanuphius entered Optina in 1891, Fr. Anatole assigned him as cell-attendant to Fr. Nektary, who was then a hieromonk. Under the guidance of the latter over the course of ten years, Fr. Barsanuphius studied the Holy Fathers in theory and in practice and passed through all the monastic steps, right up to becoming a hieromonk.

But let us return to Fr. Nektary who, having spent two and a half decades in solitude and silence, finally relaxed his reclusion. The journal of S. A. Nilus, *On the Bank of God's River,*

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* *Memoirs of Archimandrite Pimen, Superior of the Nikolaevsk Monastery on the Ugresh River,* Moscow, 1877, p. 57.

Elder Barsanuphius of Optina.

(written in 1909), shows us the make-up of the future Elder, when he began to appear among people from time to time.* We see Fr. Nektary speaking in parables and riddles with a type of foolishness, often not without clairvoyance. Nilus called him "our childish friend." This manner of Fr. Nektary was a form of his well-known secretiveness, which was due to his fear of revealing his grace-filled gifts.

Many pages of this Optina journal consist of notes on the author's contact with the future Elder.

From these notes there arises a vivid picture of Fr. Nektary; his views and outlooks are brought to light and, likewise, there is no small number of his personal accounts of his childhood. Therefore Nilus' notes are valuable as biographical material:

We were preparing to partake of Christ's Holy Mysteries on the eighth of June. The enemy does not doze and today, just when I wanted to go to confession, he treated me to a major unpleasantness which gave grounds for a misunderstanding with the Superior, whom I deeply respect and love. But it is not in vain that I have spent two years of my life living right

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* S. A. Nilus, *On the Bank of God's River,* Sergiev Posad, 1916.

Sergei Alexandrovich Nilus was born in Moscow in 1862, the son of a minor landowner. He was highly educated and among the intelligentsia, but lacked an Orthodox upbringing. Converted in his mature years, he began his career as a spiritual writer out of his love for St. Seraphim of Sarov. He married Helen Alexandrovna Ozerova, a lady-in-waiting to Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna. (Her niece, Helen Yurievna, was later the wife of Ivan M. Kontzevitch, the author of this Prima Vita, and she collaborated with him in its writing.) After meeting St. John of Kronstadt, Nilus settled close to Optina as the curator of the monastery archives, from which he published various material under the spiritual guidance of Elder Barsanuphius. He was a conservative thinker, who identified the satanic nature of the communist takeover years before it occurred. He reposed on the eve of the commemoration of his favorite saint, St. Seraphim, on January 1, 1929.

beside the monastic humility of the Optina ascetics—and I humbled myself, no matter how difficult this was for my worldly self-love. This temptation took place after the late Liturgy, when my wife and I were supposed to go to confession to our spiritual Elder, Fr. Barsanuphius. We returned home after confession, entered the doorway and looked—on the arched ceiling of my study, that had been freshly painted with oil paint, someone had written with a piece of coal in large letters across the whole arch in French—*La nuée* (the storm cloud).

I immediately guessed that the guilty party in this "mischief" was none other than our friend, Fr. Nektary—this was so much like his penchant for a certain, as it were, foolishness, under which he often concealed edifying lessons for me on one or another of the Christian virtues. It was he—without a doubt it was he—who had foreseen the appearance of storm clouds in my spiritual skies. He, my dear Batiushka, who sometimes, to everyone's amazement, liked to interject an unexpected French word into his speech!... I glanced at our terrace and he, our dear one, was sitting alone in the corner and chuckling good-naturedly, awaiting what would come of his joke.

"Ah, Batiushka, Batiushka!" I laughed along with him, "Well, you're a prankster!"

And the "prankster" arose, came up to my study, wiped the inscription off with the sleeve of his podrasnik, and declared with a smile: "See, nothing's left!"

And nothing remained in my heart of this morning's disturbance. Undoubtedly, our friend has a second sight by which he sees that which is hidden from the eyes of the common man. Not in vain has he spent almost forty years of pious life in the monastery.*

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* Ibid. pp. 204-205.

Today is the first day of the Church New Year.* The weather is splendid. The sun warms us as in spring and with its cheerful rays bathes our little garden and the marvelous Optina pine forest which, from the east and the south, comes almost right up to our secluded spot. I went out on the terrace and almost gasped from an influx of joyfully grateful feelings towards God; from the grace and beauty which, without number or measure, the Lord has granted us, settling us in this monastic heaven. What peace; what a serene, solitary life we have here; how incomparably magnificent is the almost virgin nature that surrounds us! Indeed, what are thousands of years to our pines, that majestically incline their powerful, luxuriantly green tops to us? Is it possible that some of them remember those savage days, when the evil Tartars advanced on Kozelsk, up to the walls and firing ports that held back their terrible Batu [Khan] for an entire seven weeks through the valor of the ancestors of the present-day neighbors of Optina?... I stood and gazed at all this joy; I breathed it in but didn't let it out. I couldn't admire it enough, couldn't take enough delight in it....

"And Jacob remembered," I heard a familiar voice behind my back, "that he had left his country and crossed the Jordan with only a staff, and behold—before him were his two camps. And Jacob said with contrition unto God, 'O Lord, how small I am before Thee!'"

I turned around, already knowing that it was he, our friend. Right then my wretched heart began to weep compunctionate tears to the God of my fathers, and—

"O Lord, how small I am before Thee!"

I looked, and my Batiushka was standing right beside me and rejoicing.

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* September 1/14.—Ed.

"I'm admiring your coenobium, your honor," he said, "and I'm amazed at how wisely you've deigned to act, that you have not disdained our wretchedness."

"No, not so," I objected, "it's not we, but your holy Monastery that has not disdained us—our coenobium, as you call it."

He, as if he did not hear my objection, suddenly smiled his subtle smile and turned to me with a question: "Do you know how many true coenobia there have been from the creation of the world to the present day?"

I began to try to figure it out.

"Don't bother yourself thinking; I'll give you the answer myself—three!"

"What are they?"

"The first one was in Eden, the second was in the community of Christians during apostolic times, and the third...

He paused.... "And the third is in Optina under our great Elders."

I took it into my head to object: "And Noah's ark?"

"Well," he began to laugh, "what kind of coenobium is that? Noah called people to come to him for a hundred years, but only beasts came. Now, what kind of coenobium is that?!"

Today, just like a present for the Church New Year, our Batiushka gave us a new semiprecious stone from his inexhaustible little treasure box, where the priceless treasures of his memory are kept.

"In my childhood we also had something like Noah's ark; only there were very few of us folk and our ark was also according to our size, also tiny: there was Mama, me—still on all fours—and our gray kitty. Ah, I tell you, how marvelous that kitty of ours was!... Just listen to what I'm going to tell you about him and me!

"I was still quite a small child," Fr. Nektary began his narrative. "So small, that I didn't so much walk as crawl across the

floor, but mostly I sat on my chair; though somehow or other I was already able to speak and express my thoughts. I was a meek child, obedient to a sufficient degree that my mother rarely had to punish me. I remember that at that time there were still just the two of us, Mama and me, living together; we didn't have a cat. And then, one fine day my mother acquired a kitten for our modest household. That round and happy kitty was remarkably pretty, and we quickly made friends, so that you might say we were inseparable. I would crawl across the floor and there he would be, rubbing against me and arching his little back. I would sit at my bowl of food and he would sit right beside me, waiting for his portion from my generosity. I would sit down and he would climb up on my lap and reach his face up to mine, trying to get me to pet him. And I would pet his silky fur with my hand and he would lie down on my lap, squint his eyes, and purr his little song....

"That friendship between us lasted for a long time, until it was dampened by an incident that is terrible to recall even now.

"The spot where I usually sat was at the table, where my mama would occupy herself with sewing, and near my seat a cushion was nailed to the wall, into which Mama stuck her needles and pins. Of course, I was forbidden to touch them under any circumstances—even more so to take them out of the cushion—and I submitted to this ban without question.

"But one time I climbed up to my usual place, and right after me the kitten jumped up into my lap. At that time my mother had gone off somewhere to do the housekeeping. My friend jumped up and snuggled up to me and poked his little pink nose into my face. I petted him on the back and looked at him; and suddenly, for the first time, my eyes met his so very closely. Ah, what sweet eyes they were—clear, bright, and trusting!...They astonished me; before this incident I had never suspected that my cat had such brilliant adornments in his face....

And there we were, looking one another in the eye, and we were both glad that it was so nice for us to be together. And suddenly the thought popped into my head to try, with my finger, to find out what those brilliant little pearls under the cat's eyebrows, that were looking at me so merrily, were made of. I brought my finger up to him—the kitten squinted and hid his eyes. I took away my finger, and again they looked out. This really amused me. Again I poked my finger at them, and his eyes dove under his eyebrows. Oh, what fun this was! But the idea that I had such eyes, and that they would squint the same way if someone put a finger up to them, never even occurred to me. Whether it was a long or a short time that I amused myself that way with the kitten, I don't remember—only suddenly the idea came into my head to vary the fun. The thought had barely managed to flash across my mind when my hand set about to bring it to fulfillment. 'What would happen,' I thought, 'if I took a needle out of my mother's pillow and stuck it into one of the cat's little pearls?' I reached over to the pillow and pulled out a needle.... Just then, Mama entered the room and, not looking at me, began to busy herself with tidying up. I involuntarily refrained from the amusement I had thought up. With one hand I held the needle and with the other I petted the kitten....

"'Mother dear!' I said, 'don't we have a good little kitten?'

"'How else can he be?' my mother answered, 'I wouldn't have gotten a bad one for anything.'

"'And what has he got under his eyebrows—are they eyes?'

"'They're eyes—just like you have.'

"'And what would happen,' I said, 'if I stuck a needle in the kitten's eye?'

"My mother dropped her cleaning and, as she turned to me, she cried out,

"'God preserve you!'

"And she tore the needle out of my hand.

"My mother's face was so frightened that I remember her expression to this day. But even more ingrained in my memory is her cry, 'God preserve you!'

"My mother didn't punish me then; she didn't spank me, but only tore the needle out of my hand and threatened me: 'If you ever pull a needle out of the cushion again, I'll stick it in your hand!'* From that time on I was afraid even to glance at the forbidden cushion.

"Many years went by; I was already a hieromonk. It was winter. It had turned out to be a nice, clear day. Resting after the noon meal, I was thinking about setting the samovar to boil and taking it easy with some fragrant tea. I had water in my cell but it wasn't fresh.... I poured this water out of the pitcher, took the pitcher, and trudged with it to the barrel that usually stood in the Skete by the service entrance of the refectory. I was going along peacefully, and not without pleasure, foretasting the joys of the boiling samovar and the fragrant Chinese herbs. There wasn't a soul in the skete garden. It was quiet, deserted....

"I went up to the barrel and saw that one of our old monks had climbed up and was getting a scoop of water for his samovar. Because of a recent snowstorm the barrel could only be reached from one side, along one path. I quietly walked along this and came up behind the monk who was scooping water out of the barrel. Being busy with what he was doing, and also a bit deaf, he didn't notice my approach. I waited until he finished and thought, 'Why does the ladle need such a dreadfully long handle, and with such a sharp split end? What good is it? It might even hit someone in the eye!...' I had only just had this thought when my monk, with a sharp movement of his hand, suddenly swung the ladle so that the end of the handle moved

* In another account of this same incident, Elder Nektary's mother says to him, "If you dare to poke out the cat's eye, you yourself will later be without an eye."—Ed.

right towards me! I barely managed to jump back. I still would have been a hairsbreadth away from having my eye poked out, but the unintentional culprit, who had threatened me with such peril, climbed down from the barrel, turned around, saw me and, not suspecting anything, came up to me with his pitcher for a blessing.

"'Bless, Batiushka!'

"I gave him a blessing, but in my heart I was annoyed. 'What a lout!' I thought. However, I overcame that feeling within me—he wasn't at fault, really, for the fact that he didn't have eyes in back of his head; and with that I was at peace. Suddenly my heart became so light, so joyful, that I can't even convey it to you. I went to my cell with the pitcher full of water and just about jumped for joy, that I had escaped such terrible danger.

"I came home, heated up the samovar, made some fragrant tea, and sat at the table; and suddenly it was as if a bright ray lit up in my memory the long-forgotten incident from my early childhood—the kitten, the needle, and my mother's exclamation: 'God preserve you!'

"Then, it had saved the kitten's eye, and many years later, that of her own son. If I had poked out the cat's eye at that time, I would now be without an eye. And just think," Fr. Nektary added to his story, "after this incident they cut the handle of the ladle in half, though I hadn't complained to anyone. It's obvious that all this had to happen, so as to remind my unworthiness how for everything in our life, from the cradle to the grave, we must give the strictest account to God."*

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In a few days our Abbas—the Archimandrite and the Abbot—are leaving for Holy Trinity–St. Sergius Lavra for a monastic conference.

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* Ibid., pp. 254-59.

Today I saw Fr. Nektary.

"What are your thoughts," I asked, "about the upcoming monastic conference?"

"My thoughts?" he repeated with a smile. "What kind of thoughts can a man have, who's in sorrow in the morning and despondent in the evening? You, your honor, have read a hundred books—consequently, books even jump into your hand."

I was familiar with this saying of Fr. Nektary's, and thus I did not despair of obtaining an answer from him, even in a parable, the favorite form of his wise conversation. I was not mistaken.

"Do you remember your childhood?" he asked me, when I began to insist on an answer.

"I remember. How could I not remember?"

"And I also remember," he said. "We kids would run around to our hearts' content; we played as much as we wanted. Then we would sit or lie down in some secluded little spot, in the open air, and look up at God's heaven. And we would see light clouds floating and running across the sky—running and chasing one another. Where, you would wonder, were they heading, across the boundless blue expanse?... Ah, how good it would have been to ride on those clouds!...

"'They're awfully high up—it's impossible!'—the group decides with a sigh. 'You'd never climb up there.' ... Ah, how good it would be!

"And then one from among us steps forward—the smartest one: 'Oh, you've given up already,' he says. 'What makes it so impossible? Here you can't do it—they're high above us; but there'—he points to the horizon—'you can reach them with your hand. Let's run there quickly, climb up and take a ride!'

"We all saw that our 'smart one' was talking sense; that's why he was our ringleader. 'Well, how about it? Let's run!' And our little flock of unfeathered fledgling roadrunners was ready

to go from word to deed, but then we remembered the ravine we would have to cross; and in the ravine, most likely, there were robbers. And we remembered our homes: one had a father at home, another had a mother and a grandmother—they'd give you what's good for you!... We remembered and gave up our venture as hopeless. 'What do we need to fly across the sky for? Let's better keep running around on the ground!'"

The Elder stated his parable and smiled his enigmatic smile: Figure it out the best you can!

I was not satisfied with such an answer.

"Batiushka," I said, "tell me outright—is it possible that nothing will come of the conference?"

"St. Sergius will get mad at them," replied Fr. Nektary.

"At whom—at them?"

"Yes, at our people that are going. What are they 'assembling in a mob' for? After all, its forbidden by the monastic rule. The monastic rule was given by an angel. It's not for people to go changing it and adding their own inventions.... They need to weep and repent in their cells alone with God and not gather together to their disgrace."

"How is it a disgrace? What are you saying, Batiushka?"

"To their disgrace—that means in public, in the sight of all who are not too lazy to laugh at a monk, who have forgotten what a monk is.... What kinds of questions could there be there? Everything's been given; everything's been defined by the original founders of monastic life. Who can be higher than the God-bearing desert Fathers? We need to pray and sit in our cells and not stick our noses where they don't belong—that's what we need!"

"What would happen if you said all this to the Abbas?" I asked.

Instead of an answer, he said to me, "It wouldn't bore you to listen to another little story, would it?"

And the Elder continued:

"Once upon a time there lived a nobleman. He was rich and prominent, and he had all kinds of friends who hung on his every word and tried to please him in every way. And this nobleman had a rather stern character and liked to have everyone obey him.... Once, on a hunt with his friends, the nobleman went off to one side and, in the sight of all, got right down on the ground, pressed his ear to the earth, listened, turned on his other side, listened with his other ear, and cried out to his henchmen, 'Come here, everyone!'

"They all ran up to him.

"'Lie down—listen!'

"They lay down and listened.

"'Do you hear it? The earth is quaking: mushrooms are coming up!'

"And everyone cried out with one voice, 'We hear it, we hear it!'

"Only one of his friends got up in silence.

"'Why are you silent,' asked the nobleman. 'Don't you hear it?'

"'No,' he answered, 'I don't hear it.'

"Then the nobleman said, 'Eh, brother, it's obvious that you're a bit hard of hearing!'

"And everyone began to laugh at him, and with loud laughter joined in with the nobleman's words: 'He's not just hard of hearing, he's stone deaf!'"

Batiushka finished telling his little story and was silent.

"And that's it?" I asked.

"That's all. What more do you want?"

And it was true; what more did I want?

* * *

I am continuing my mental battle with the vice of smoking, but it's still completely unsuccessful. I have to quit this filthy

and stupid occupation; it is noticeably ruining my health—the gift of God—and that is a sin.

The ever-memorable Elder Ambrose once heard an admission from one of his spiritual daughters:

"Batiushka! I smoke and this is tormenting me!"

"Well," the Elder answered her, "this isn't a great misfortune, if you can quit."

"That's just the problem," she said, "I can't quit!"

"Then it's a sin," said the Elder, "and you've got to repent of it and stop doing it."

I also have to quit, but how do I do it? I'm consoled by the words of our Elders, who promised me freedom from this sin "when the time is right."

The late patron of Optina Monastery and spiritual friend of its great Elders, Archbishop Gregory of Kaluga, could not stand this vice among the clergy, but he was condescending towards laymen who smoked, and even towards his seminarians, before they joined the clerical staff. But he categorically demanded from candidates who were preparing for ordination that they cease from this filthy habit, and he did not ordain those who smoked.

Our friend Fr. Nektary, to whom I often complained about my weakness, informed me of this.

"After all," he consoled me, "you, your honor, are a layman—what's to be expected from you? But here... "

And he related the following to me:

"In the days of Archbishop Gregory, a spirit-bearing and monk-loving man, the following incident happened: a seminarian from Kaluga, who had graduated at the head of his class, and who, because of his exceptional abilities was personally known to the Archbishop, had to prepare himself for ordination to one of the better positions in the diocese. He appeared before the Archbishop for a blessing and to set a date

for the ordination. The hierarch received him with extreme affection, conversed amiably with him and, having shown fatherly kindness towards him, dismissed him, assigning a date for the ordination. However, when dismissing the candidate, he did not fail to ask him, 'Well then, brother, do you smoke, or not?'

"'No, your Eminence,' replied the candidate, 'I don't go in for that.'

"'Well, good,' the Archbishop exclaimed joyfully, 'see what a fine fellow I've got! Well then, prepare yourself, and may the Lord bless you!'

"According to custom, the candidate bowed to the feet of the Archbishop. His frock coat flew open, and from his breast pocket cigarettes began to fall out onto the floor, one after the other.

"The Archbishop flared up in indignation.

"'Who made you lie to me?' he exclaimed with great anger. 'To whom have you lied? When have you lied? When preparing to serve God in holiness and in truth?... Get out of here! There is no position for you, nor will there be one!... '

"And with that he drove the liar out of his sight.... So, your honor," added Fr. Nektary, looking at me with his ever-laughing, kind and affectionate gaze, "why be dejected that it's not the smell of athonite incense that proceeds from your mouth? To whom are you obliged?... And, you know what?" he exclaimed, and his face lit up with a kind smile. "You won't believe it—I myself barely avoided enlisting in the ranks of smokers. This was back in my childhood, when I still lived at home, together with my mother.... In the whole wide world there were only the two of us, Mama and me, and there was also a cat that lived with us.... We were of a low estate, and because of this we were poor: who needed people like us? Well then, once my mother wasn't keeping an eye on me, and I went ahead and

borrowed some tobacco from some of my rich peers. They had no shortage of tobacco, and they willingly treated everyone who wanted it. They rolled themselves a cigarette, smoked and smoked, and then stuck it in my mouth—'Here, have a smoke!' Well, following them, I myself began to smoke. The first time I tried it I became dizzy, but I liked it all the same. Cigarette butt after cigarette butt, and I already began to get used to this mischief. I started to beg and then to borrow on credit, hoping somehow to pay it back. But what was I going to pay it back with, when my own mother lived, as they say, from bread to kvass, and there wasn't always enough bread....Then my mother began to notice the smell of tobacco coming from me....'What's this, Kolya (my name in the world was Nicholas), you haven't begun to smoke, have you?'

"'What do you mean, Mother dear?' I would say. 'I hardly think so!'

"And I would quickly move aside, as if I were doing something. It went that way once, then another time, and then I got caught. Once I had barely managed to inhale some borrowed tobacco on the sly, when suddenly, there was my mother.

"'Were you just smoking?' she asked.

"Again I said, 'No, Mama.'

"But where did I get 'no' from? I reeked of tobacco from way off. My mother didn't say a word to me then, but she gazed at me with such a sorrowful look that you could say that my whole soul was overturned within me. She went away from me somewhere to do the housework, and I hid in a secluded corner and began to weep inconsolably, that I had grieved her. And not only had I grieved her, I had deceived her and lied on top of that. I can't express how painful this was for me!... The day passed, night came, and my mind sought for sleep; I lay in my bed and whimpered, lay and whimpered.... My mother heard it.

"'What is it, Kolya—you're not crying, are you?'

"'No, Mama.'

"'Why aren't you sleeping?'

"And with these words, she got up, lit the lamp and came over to me. My face was all wet with tears and my pillow was soaked....

"And what happened between us then!... We both had a good cry and were reconciled. Having a good cry with one so dear—how nicely we were reconciled!

"And thus ended my mischief with smoking."

* * *

I stopped by to pay a visit to our friend Fr. Nektary, who had not been to see us for a long time.

"Why haven't we seen you for so long, Batiushka?" With such a question did we meet that semi-recluse, known to all the Optina monks for the concentratedness of his life.

"I think," he replied with a smile, "that it would be enough for sinful Nektary to see you once a year, and how many times have I already seen you this year?... For a monk there are three exits—to church, to the cell, and to the grave. That's the law for a monk."

"And if the work of apostolic preaching is needed?" I objected.

"Well," he answered me, "learned academicians exist for that, but I'm an uneducated man of low estate."

But meanwhile, this "uneducated man of low estate," amazed not only me with his erudition, but many who succeeded merely in coming into contact with him.

I spoke to Batiushka concerning a heavenly portent that had occurred in Moscow at the beginning of the month (a false sun and moon).

"How do you view these manifestations?"

"Eh, your honor,"—Fr. Nektary sometimes called me that—"how can my ignorance answer such questions? They

pose a problem for me, but you can answer. After all, you've read a hundred books, but I'm an uncouth man."

"Don't avoid answering, Batiushka," I objected. "Perhaps in the hundred books that I've read there's only darkness, but in your one monastic one, which you've read all your life, there's enough light for the whole world."

Fr. Nektary looked at me seriously, piercingly.

"What kind of answer do you, personally, need from me?" he asked.

"One that would respond to the anxiety in my soul. What signs will there be in the heavens—in the sun, the moon and the stars—which, according to the words of the Savior, must come before the end of the world?"

"Look what you want from my paltry mind! No, your honor, I haven't attained that measure," Fr. Nektary replied to my question. "But you know, there was one thing, and it's confidential—but, all right, I'll tell you anyway: last month—I don't recall the date exactly—the Superior (Elder Barsanuphius) was walking with me from Matins, and he said to me: 'Fr. Nektary, I've had a terrible dream—so terrible, that I'm still affected by it, even now.... I'll tell it to you sometime later,' the Superior added, having thought for a little while, and then he left for his cell. Then, having gone two steps, he turned to me and said, 'Antichrist came to me. I'll tell you the rest later.'"

"Well, what happened?" I interrupted Fr. Nektary. "What did he say?"

"Nothing!" he replied. "He himself never raised the question again, and I was afraid to interrogate him. So this question has remained unclarified to this day.... As to heavenly signs, and how to regard them and other manifestations of nature which depart from the usual order of things, I myself don't have the ability to unveil their mysterious powers. I remember

that in about 1885, in the days of the skete Superior Fr. Anatole (Zertsalov), such an unusual sunset occurred in the winter, that across the whole of Optina for about an hour, the snow looked like blood. The late Fr. Anatole was a man of exalted spiritual life, a true doer of mental prayer, and a clairvoyant. Something about this manifestation must have been revealed to him, and he pointed to it as indicating bloody events that were soon to occur, that forewarned of the imminent end of the world."

"Did he perhaps say to you that time that antichrist had already been born?"

"He didn't express it so definitely, I remember, but he often spoke mysteriously about the nearness of his appearance. In the Belev Convent, Fr. Anatole had no small number of spiritual daughters. To one of them, who lived with her mother, he said, 'Your mother will not be alive, but you will live to see antichrist himself.' The mother has died now, but the daughter is still living, though she's already almost eighty years old."

"Is it possible, Batiushka, that the end is so close?"

Fr. Nektary smiled and instantly went from a serious tone to a humorous one:

"You'll read that in one or another of your hundred books," he replied, laughing. And with these words Fr. Nektary steered the conversation to some ordinary topic.*

* * *

That was an entry from the end of March, and here is an entry from the first of July:

Fr. Nektary stopped in. Having blessed me, he retained my hand in his and said seriously, in a solemn, measured tone,

"In the house of David there is great fear."

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* Ibid., pp. 105-107.

And he began to laugh—where did all that seriousness disappear to?

"What does that mean?" I asked.

Fr. Nektary again became serious.

"One of our skete monks," he answered me, "had a dream the other day. It seemed as if he went into the altar of our Forerunner Church, looked around in the direction of the royal doors, and saw, to his horror, that the figure of a beast stood there.... "

"What kind of beast?"

"From the Apocalypse. His appearance was so terrible that it defied description. This image, before the eyes of the one who had this vision, changed its appearance three times, but remained the same beast." Fr. Nektary said this, waved his hand, and added, "As for the rest, all kinds of things can appear in a dream to monastic feeblemindedness! Don't impart any significance, then, to my conversation.... "*

* * *

June 16. Fr. Nektary dropped by and for no apparent reason struck up a conversation about some prominent lady whom we were to expect. Who was this lady? Our friend does not speak without reason.

June 19. Our long-standing friend and great favorite, Olympiada Fyodorovna, is asking to come see us. We received a letter from her today—she has not written to us for a long time, and in this letter begs us to accept her into our life. She writes that she is prepared to live even in Kozelsk, if only to be close to that source from which we are drawing living water; to live according to that which our souls live by.

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* Elder Nektary did not always give credence to Nilus' infatuation with the subjects of antichrist, ominous dreams and supernatural manifestations, as his niece informed us.—Ed.

Isn't it possible that our Lipochka* is that prominent lady whom Fr. Nektary foretold to us? She is not distinguished by noble birth or wealth, but her soul is truly noble—good, loving and meek.... It's just that her little head is all muddled—living continually in Petersburg, in contact with people of the modern crowd, not excluding spiritual persons of a renovationist orientation, our Lipochka has slipped off the axle of real Orthodoxy and now tosses about from side to side, unable to find rest for herself anywhere.

July 7. Our favorite and friend, Olympiada Fyodorovna R. arrived, whom I had mentioned earlier, supposing her to be the "prominent lady" foretold by Fr. Nektary.... Well, the world has really worn the poor thing out....

Fr. Nektary, who had not come to see us for a long time, visited today. He precisely foresaw the arrival of his "prominent lady," and right then struck up a conversation about the stars, affirming that on the map of the stars of heaven he had found his "lucky star."

Our Lipochka listened to his talk with surprise, then took me aside and quietly asked:

"To what purpose is he saying all this?"

"I don't know."

"You haven't told him anything about me?"

"No."

"Strange."

"What's so strange?"

"Why it's strange that I—even I—have been searching all my life for my 'lucky star,' and I still haven't found it."

"And you see," I said, "he's found it!"

"Tell me about it!!"

"Take a closer look at Optina, at our life, at our interests—maybe you, too, will find your star...."

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* Lipochka is the diminutive form of Olympiada.—TRANS.

"And have you found yours?" asked Lipochka.

"You see that we're not searching," I said. "Therefore we've found it!"

Lipochka mused about it, but it seemed that she did not entirely believe what I had said.

* * *

I heard tell that a man that is rather close to me through my previous connection with the Orel province wishes to leave a significant sum of money after his death for the founding of a department of church oratorical skill at one of the theological academies. Such a distortion, by a good man, of the understanding of the source of church preaching saddened me. I had a discussion on this theme with Fr. Nektary. True, I did most of the talking, while he held his peace and shone with a subtle smile in the depths of the pupils and in the corners of his bright, luminous eyes.

"Well, Batiushka," I asked, "what do you think about this?"

"I should be bowing down to you; you don't need to take anything from me," he replied with a smile. "Forgive me magnanimously. After all, you've read a hundred books, and me? I'm sad in the morning and despondent by evening...."

And even his eyes themselves broke out into childlike laughter.

"Well, good! Well, good! You say they want to start a department of eloquence at an academy. Maybe it will even be a good thing. Haven't you heard about how a certain village priest, who hadn't studied in any academy, transfixed the Tsar himself with his sermon? And which Tsar? The savior of all Europe—Alexander the Blessed!"

"I hadn't heard, Batiushka."

"Then it won't bore you to hear about it. This was during one of the Tsar's trips across Russia, not long before he went

from Petersburg to Taganrog.* At that time, please note, there were no railroads, and the tsars rode through their kingdom by horse. And so it happened that the Sovereign was to travel through one poor village. The village stood on the Tsar's route, and the Tsar had to travel through it in the daytime; but according to the itinerary there was no stop indicated there for the royal procession. The local priest knew this, but due to his love for the Tsar he nevertheless wanted to meet the royal procession and send it off in a worthy manner. He called his parishioners together to the church, which was situated on the very road that the Tsar was on, towards the time that he was to pass through. Everyone was gathered in festive attire—Batiushka came out in bright vestments, with a cross in his hands, and beside him was the deacon with holy water and a sprinkling-brush. They began to wait for the dust to be raised on the road, indicating the Sovereign's procession. Finally, when the royal carriage came into view, the priest lifted the cross high over his head and began to make the sign of the cross over the approaching Autocrat. The Sovereign noticed this and ordered his procession to stop, got out of the carriage, and headed towards the priest. The priest of God gave him the cross to venerate, sprinkled him with holy water, made the sign of the cross over him and gave this sermon:

"'In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Earthly king! Enter the house of the Heavenly King, for thine is the Kingdom, and His is the power and the glory, now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen.'

* It was on this trip to Taganrog that Tsar Alexander I allegedly died. There is, however, a widely held belief that he merely staged his own death in response to the counsel of Elder Nicholas of Valaam and appeared some time later in Siberia in the guise of a peasant Elder, Fyodor Kuzmich. It is said that he took on this podvig to atone for the sins he committed in the first half of his reign, which was marked by widespread liberalism and a departure from Orthodoxy, and which began with the murder of his father, Emperor Paul I.—Ed.

"And what do you, my Batiushka Sergei Alexandrovich, think? This sermon so pierced the royal heart that right then and there the Tsar commanded his adjutant to issue fifty rubles to the priest for church needs. More than that—he made him repeat the sermon and donated another fifty rubles. The Tsar valued the village priest's short sermon at one hundred silver rubles...."

Fr. Nektary broke off his story and began to laugh with his childlike laughter....

"But then again," he added with a serious look, "you, your honor, have deigned to read a hundred books—books even jump into your hands."

Then he was silent for a moment and said:

"When our late bishop, the most gracious Macarius, consecrated me as a hieromonk, he, discerning my spiritual disorder with his hierarchical insight, gave me a sermon after my ordination that was also short and powerful. So powerful was that sermon, that I will never forget it to the end of my days. And how much, in all, did he say to me? He called me over to himself in the altar and said: 'Nektary! When you are grieved and despondent, and when you find yourself amid great temptations, repeat only one thing to yourself—"O Lord, spare, save, and have mercy on Thy slave, Hieromonk Nektary."' That's all the bishop said to me, but his sermon saved me more than once and still saves me, for it was spoken with power."

One can receive this power only from God.

* * *

June 19. Today, Fr. Nektary, during a conversation about the narrowness of the monastic path, recalled one of his skete brothers, a certain Fr. Stephen, who had led a pious life in the monastery for twenty-five years but still did not hold out to the end in his podvig.

What happened was this: Fr. Stephen published excerpts he had made from the works of St. John Chrysostom without the Monastery's blessing. Incidentally, in due time this publication had no small success among lay people, related Fr. Nektary. "It came into the hands of the Superior of Optina, Archimandrite Isaac. He summoned Stephen and said, pointing at the book, 'Whose is this?'

"'Mine.'

"'And where do you live?'

"'In the Skete.'

"'I'm aware that you live in the Skete. And from whom did you get a blessing to print this?'

"'I printed it myself.'

"'Well, if it's "yourself," then I don't even want to smell your book around here. Got it? Get out!'

"That was the extent of their conversation. Stephen felt extremely insulted by the Archimandrite, but he concealed the offence in his heart and didn't say a word about it, not even to the Elder. When the time for tonsures came around, and they passed him by because of his willfulness, Stephen up and left for the world, with no regard for his whole twenty-five year podvig. He lived in his home town, in his own two-storied house, for about five years, and thus died in the world."

Fr. Nektary related this sad story to me, looked me in the eyes, grinned and said:

"See what an author's self-love can sometimes do!"

And a misunderstanding had almost arisen between me and the Archimandrite on account of my "author's self-love."

How did Fr. Nektary know this? Well, he knows, and from time to time he teaches me a corresponding lesson.

As he was leaving us and blessing me, Fr. Nektary retained my hand in his and began to laugh his childlike laugh.

Elder Joseph of Optina.

"Now you write all this down!"
And so, I'm writing it.*

3. ELDERSHIP
(1912-1923)

Beginning in 1905, Elder Joseph, Fr. Ambrose's successor, often became ill and noticeably weakened. In May, after a serious illness, he resigned his position as skete Superior, and the Holy Synod assigned Fr. Barsanuphius to this post which, according to the custom of Optina, was bound up with eldership. Fr. Barsanuphius, a strong-willed, brilliant personality, was likewise manifest as a bearer of the special grace of God.

Fr. Nektary, who always strove to live unnoticed, yielded the first place to Fr. Barsanuphius who, in reality, was his own disciple.

After five or six years Elder Barsanuphius, as a result of intrigues and slanders, was transferred from Optina to be the Superior of the Golutvin Monastery, which was in a state of complete decline. In a year, Schema-archimandrite Barsanuphius reposed (1913).

In him were fulfilled the words of the Apostle Paul, that in all times—as it was in ancient times, so it was now—"those born according to the flesh" persecute "those born according to the spirit" (cf. Gal. 4:29).

With Fr. Barsanuphius' departure from Optina, Fr. Nektary could not avoid becoming an elder and, willing or not, he had to accept it. One must assume that he attempted to get himself released from this obedience. This is how nun Nektaria recounts this, from the words of an eyewitness:

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* S. A. Nilus, pp. 211-13.

When he was assigned to be an elder, he acted like a fool to such a degree that they even wanted to dismiss him; but one monk, noted for his lofty spiritual life, said: "Let him be—he's prophesying."

Now everything that he prefigured then has come true. For example, he would put a bathrobe on over his naked body and his bare feet would shine as he walked. In 1920-22, even students and employees came to us for services barefoot, without underwear, or with an overcoat over torn underwear. He collected assorted rubbish—pebbles, bits of broken glass, clay, etc.—constructed a tiny cabinet, and showed it to everyone, saying: 'This is my museum.' Now there is a museum there. He took an electric light, hid it under his riassa, walked around the room and from time to time turned it on: 'I've caught a little piece of lightning from the sky and hidden it under my riassa.' 'That's no lightning, that's just a lamp,' they would say. 'Ah, you figured it out!' And now, every now and then, he gives us his heavenly revelations, but because of his great humility, he does so quite rarely and only in cases of great need.

Concerning the first steps of Fr. Nektary's eldership, nun Thaisia took down the words of Elena Alexandrovna Nilus, who lived in Optina for a few years and knew Fr. Nektary well.

Elder Nektary was the spiritual son of Elder Joseph, the successor of Batiushka Ambrose and his—Fr. Joseph's—confessor.

He received people in the hut of his reposed Elders, Frs. Ambrose and Joseph, where he himself began to live. But because of his profound humility he did not consider himself to be an elder, and said that visitors were actually coming to Batiushka Ambrose's cell, and that his cell should speak to them in his place. Fr. Nektary himself spoke little and rarely, and then often allegorically, half-foolishly. He would frequently give a visitor something to read and then walk out, leaving

him alone with his thoughts. But this silent reception in the grace-enveloped cell of the greatest of the Optina Elders, where Elder Ambrose's own presence could be keenly sensed, as if he were alive; those few words of his humble replacement, who had inherited, along with the gift of eldership, his gifts of clairvoyance and love for the human soul; this solitary reading and meditation—all left an indelible impression on the soul of the visitor.

There was an incident when an archpriest-academician visited Fr. Nektary. "What could I say to him? After all, he's learned," the Elder said afterwards. "I left him alone in Elder Ambrose's cell. Let Batiushka himself instruct him." The archpriest, in his turn, warmly thanked the Elder for his welcome. He said that, being left alone, he had pondered his whole past life and had understood and experienced much in a new way in the Elder's quiet cell.

But the Elder did not receive everyone in that fashion. With some he spoke much and enthusiastically, amazing the person with whom he was speaking with his great and comprehensive knowledge. On these occasions he abandoned his manner of acting somewhat as a fool. After one such talk his companion in conversation—also an academy-educated archpriest—was interested in knowing: "Which academy did Batiushka attend?" Another time Fr. Nektary had a talk with a student about astronomy. He also was curious: "From which university did the Elder graduate?"

The notes of nun M., a spiritual daughter of Metropolitan Macarius, to whom the Optina Elders directed her, relate to the beginning of his time as an elder. The Metropolitan sent her manuscript to the editors of the *Trinity Word.**

We reproduce these notes here:

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* *Troitskoye Slovo,* nos. 354 & 355, January 22 & 29, 1917.

Fate was tossing me from side to side. I won't go into the reasons, but I was leading a merry, scattered life. I did not get what I wanted—my soul was always pained about this—and I, so as to find self-oblivion, sought lively, light-hearted company, with whom I could drown out this pain of soul. Finally, this became a habit, and thus it remained until, at last, by virtue of certain circumstances, I was forced to lead a family life for a year, until the time that I left for Optina Monastery. During that year I ceased my habits of drinking binges and trips to places of entertainment, but I was unable to get used to a family atmosphere. I had to come to some kind of decision and begin life decisively along one path. I was at a crossroads—I did not know what manner of life to choose.

I had a good friend, a religious young lady. Once she told me that the book *Calm Havens for the Respite of a Suffering Soul,* by Vladimir P. Bykov, had come into her hands. In it there is mention of Optina Monastery, in the Kaluga Province. It tells of how wonderful the Elders are there, how they receive all who wish to have a word with them about something and give them counsel, and how they, by their own lives, present an example of Christian life.

We both became interested in this Monastery and decided to go there. My friend went there first, during Cheesefare Week, and returned in an extraordinary state. She told me that there was nothing like what she had seen and heard there, and that I could not imagine it. She spoke to me about the Elders. The first one she had come across was Fr. Nektary, who lived in the Skete. He received few people each day, but kept each one with him for a long time. He spoke little, and more often gave people something to read, though the answers frequently did not correspond to the questions. But the reader who had a good understanding of what he had read would find something pertaining to himself in that which he had been compelled to read,

and would see that, perhaps, this was really more important than what he had persistently asked about. There were also occasions when both the Elder and the visitor would sit silently for a long time and, not having said one word to one another, the Elder would appoint another time for his visitor to come.

Another Elder, Fr. Anatole, received people differently. He sometimes managed to receive several hundred people per day. He spoke very quickly, did not detain one for long, but in a few minutes would say that which was of particular importance to the one questioning him. He also often went out for a general blessing and would, at that time, quickly answer certain people's questions, or sometimes simply made remarks to one or another. She spent no more than five minutes with him, but he pointed out the main shortcomings of her soul which, as she said, no one knew. She was amazed. She would have liked to have seen him once more, but was unable to do so, since she had already hired a coachman and had to go home.

This is the sort of impression my friend came away with and related to me. Of course, after her narrative I liked Fr. Anatole more, and it seemed to me that it would be better if I could have a talk with him about my life. I wanted quickly, quickly to go there. But it was useless to go during the Fast, since at that time in Optina it was difficult for a new person to get to see the Elders for a talk, and therefore I put it off until Pascha. I left at last on Passion Friday and arrived early on Saturday morning at Kozelsk. I hired a coach and, an hour later, drove up to the "grace-filled little corner of Russia." I stopped at the guest house by the holy gates and saw Fr. Alexei. I put my things in order, hastily drank a cup of tea and ran quickly to Fr. Anatole. Along the way someone pointed out the grave of the revered Elder Ambrose to me, and I fell upon the cold marble stone and begged him to arrange this trip to my benefit. I entered the church portico. I was shown a door on the

right—Fr. Anatole's reception room. I entered and saw a small circle of people standing around someone, but I could not see the one standing in the center. The desire to make the sign of the Cross had only just come to me and I had not yet managed to cross myself, when all of a sudden someone parted the crowd and a little old man with a sweet smile and kind, kind eyes suddenly cried out to me, "Come here, come quickly; did you arrive long ago?" I ran up to him for a blessing and replied, "I've only just now arrived, Batiushka, and here I've hurried to see you."

"But you have relatives here—right, right?" asked Fr. Anatole. "No, Batiushka, I have no relations anywhere, let alone here," I answered. "There, there; well, come over here to me." And Fr. Anatole, taking me by the hand, led me into his cell. His cell was unusually bright—the sun flooded the whole of it with its resplendent light. Here he sat on a chair near the icons and I knelt before him and began to tell him about my life. I spoke for a long time, and he either held my head in his hands, or got up and walked around the room, or went out to the other room as if he were looking for something; and all the while he quietly sang, "Most Holy Theotokos, save us." When I finished my account the Elder did not say anything definite about what I needed to do from then on. When I asked him when he would be able to confess me, he said, "Right now." The confession took place right then and there, at first according to the confession book, and then extemporaneously. But what a confession it was! I could never have imagined anything like it before. In fact, I had neither confessed nor received Holy Communion for eight years. Now, in my ignorance, I did not think that one had to say everything in such detail, and I was amazed when the Elder himself posed questions to me, forcing me to answer them, and thus to pronounce the sins with my own lips.

The confession ended. He read the prayer of absolution, but told me to consider a little more whether I had forgotten anything, and to come back in two hours to confess to him again. At this point he gave me a few little books and dismissed me. I came to my room and, as they say, I was not myself. I began to try to remember everything from the very beginning. And only then did I think—how strangely Fr. Anatole had met me, as if we were old acquaintances.

Liturgy was at noon. After standing through it, I again went to see Fr. Anatole. I told him something of what I had remembered, but he again told me to think about it and to come once more for confession in the evening, after Vespers. It was clear that he knew of something that I had not said, but in the evening I again did not recall it and did not say what I needed to. From Fr. Anatole I set out for the Skete to Fr. Nektary, just to receive a blessing. But no sooner did I see him, than I immediately sensed that he was a relative of mine, even closer. His calm movements, his meek voice when he gave a blessing: "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit"—everything about him was holy. His cell-attendant, Fr. Stephen,* led

* Later Elder Schema-Archimandrite Sebastian (Fomin, November 28, 1884-April 19, 1966). He was born in a poor peasant family in the village of Kosmodamianovskoye, in the Orel Province. He entered Optina Monastery in 1905, was assigned to the St. John the Forerunner Skete as cell-attendant to Elder Joseph (Litovkin), and after his repose, to Elder Nektary. He was tonsured in 1917. Two months before the closure of the Monastery he was ordained a hierodeacon (1923), and later a hieromonk (1927). Fr. Sebastian remained as Elder Nektary's cell-attendant until the latter's repose. Fulfilling the Elder's blessing to serve in a parish after his repose, Fr. Sebastian at first went to Kozelsk and then to Kaluga, and finally to Tambov, where he was assigned to a parish in the city of Kozlov, in the St. Elias Church. He served there from 1928 until his arrest in 1933. He was sentenced to a term of ten years, which he served out in a camp in Karaganda. After this he served in a parish in the city of Karaganda, where he was revealed as a clairvoyant elder in the full tradition of his predecessors. He

me into the cell, to the Elder. I could not refrain from telling him about my life and about the purpose of my trip here. He sat the whole time with closed eyes. I had not yet managed to finish my story when his cell-attendant knocked at Batiushka's door and said that the brothers had come to him for confession. Batiushka arose and said to me: "Come tomorrow at six and I'll be able to speak with you for two hours. Tomorrow I'll be more free." I took a blessing and left.

At twelve at night the Midnight Service and Matins began. I stood through all of it. After Matins they read the rule for those who were preparing to receive Holy Communion. Liturgy was to be at five. After the rule I went to my room to rest a little, since I was quite tired—firstly, from the sleepless night on the trip, and secondly, from all the agitation I had undergone that day. I heard nothing—neither the bell for Liturgy nor the brother's knock on the door to wake me, and by the time I did wake up and run to church, Communion was over and the Holy Gifts were being carried back into the altar. Ach! How terrible I felt in that moment and, standing in the church portico, I began to weep bitterly. Only then did I call to mind the fact that I had come for Communion without the necessary preparation.... Then I sensed that the Lord Himself had shown me, in reality, that one cannot approach this great Mystery negligently, not having purified oneself both spiritually and bodily. I cried all day, despite the fact that it was the day of Christ's Bright Resurrection.

During the day I went to Fr. Anatole with my distress and asked if it were possible to receive Holy Communion on the second or third day of the Feast. But Fr. Anatole did not permit

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was raised to the rank of Archimandrite in 1957 and awarded an official document by Patriarch Alexis I "for zealous service to the Holy Church." On his nameday, at the end of 1965, he was awarded a mitre and staff. Three days before his repose he was tonsured into the schema. —Ed.

me, and counseled me to prepare in Moscow for Thomas Sunday. To my questions about my future life, Fr. Anatole replied evasively—first he said that it was good to become a kind mother to someone else's children, then he said that it was better not to do this, but rather to live alone, since otherwise it would be very difficult. Then he instructed me to turn to the Elder, Metropolitan Macarius of Moscow, with my questions, and to do whatever he advised. With this, the conversation was over. In the evening I went to see Fr. Nektary. The three reception rooms were full of people. At exactly six o'clock the Elder came out to give blessings. I stood in the front corner of the second room. After blessing everyone he returned from the third reception room, blessed me a second time and then, turning to the rest, said: "Forgive me, I can't receive anyone today," and left for his cell. I followed him. The people began to disperse. I spoke with him for a long time. He told me: "Even if you had the whole world in your power, you would have no peace and you would be unhappy. Your soul is tossed, it suffers, and you think you can satisfy it with external things, or with outward self-forgetfulness. No! All this is not right—your soul will never be satisfied with this.... You must leave everything.... "

After this Fr. Nektary sat for a long time, his head bowed on his breast, and then he said: "I see the grace of God close to you—you'll be a nun...."

"What are you saying, Batiushka?! Me, in a monastery? But I'm entirely unfit for that! I don't even have the strength to live in one."

"I don't know when this will happen—perhaps soon, and perhaps in ten years—but you will, without fail, be a nun in a monastery."

At this point I said that Fr. Anatole had advised me to go to Moscow, to Metropolitan Macarius, for counsel. "Well, then, go to him, and do everything—everything that Fr. Anatole told

you and that the Elder will tell you." And then he again began to speak about monasteries and about how I must conduct myself in one.

I left him at nine in the evening. Something extraordinary had happened to me. That which had seemed so important to me up to then I now considered to be nothing. I sensed that something must be accomplished beyond me, and that there was no longer a reason for me to ask about my future life. The gold that I was wearing burned my hands, my fingers and my ears. When I came into my room I took it all off. I was ashamed of myself. Fr. Nektary had made such an impression on me that I was ready to stay here, near him, for the rest of my life, and not return to Moscow. I was ready to endure all privations, if only I could be here. But it was impossible to do this immediately. The city with its tumult, my family which, a few hours ago, had been dear to me—all of this had now become distant and strange....

On the third day of the Feast, Tuesday, I went with Fr. Nektary's blessing to look at the Shamordino Convent, which is located seven miles from Optina. I became acquainted with the Abbess, Mother Valentina. I had a look at Elder Ambrose's cell. Everything here looked as it had during the Elder's time. A packet of leaflets for distribution lay on the table—a publication of Shamordino Convent. The nun who showed me all this told me that those who venerate Elder Ambrose sometimes place this packet of leaflets under his pillow, then pray, and then, taking out one leaflet, they accept it as if from the Elder. I also did this and drew out a leaflet entitled *Fr. Ambrose, Guide to Monastics.* The nun glanced at the leaflet and said to me, "That must mean that you'll be nun." I replied, "I don't know, it's hardly likely." "Well, you'll see what happens—that's the leaflet that came out." I paid no attention to this, but put the leaflet away, all the same. I liked everything in

Shamordino. Returning the same day to Fr. Nektary, I related my impressions to him and said that I would ask a blessing from Metropolitan Macarius to enter Shamordino, so as to be closer to Fr. Nektary.

On Thursday evening, completely changed, spiritually resurrected, as it were, I went home. Then I recalled the explanation of a lady—one of Fr. Anatole's spiritual daughters—that at Optina's holy gates an icon of Christ's Resurrection hangs by the exit, as a sign that all who visit Optina leave resurrected.

Two weeks after my arrival from Optina I prepared to go and see the Elder that had been indicated to me. I prayed beforehand: "O Lord, tell me Thy will through the lips of this Elder." But I never imagined what I heard from him. He said that it would be difficult for me in Shamordino, and that it would be better for me if I went to the Altai, where I would be needed for the mission. Since I had decided earlier that I would do whatever he told me, I answered right then that I agreed.

I began to prepare for my departure and settled my affairs. In two weeks I was all ready, but the Elder delayed my trip, wishing to give me a travelling companion. At this time I succeeded in visiting my dear Optina Monastery once again.

Fr. Nektary greatly rejoiced over my decision and at the change that had come over me, but Fr. Anatole at first did not even recognize me—so changed was I, both in appearance and in dress.

To my questions about evil thoughts that could attack me, Fr. Anatole answered, "Thoughts are salvation for us, if we realize that they are bad, battle against them and don't bring them to fulfillment."

Fr. Nektary said, "No matter what you're doing at any time—sitting, walking, working—say with your heart, 'Lord, have mercy.' Living in the monastery, you will see and experience the whole meaning of life. In regard to everything you

must keep to meekness and the middle way. When there will be sorrows and you have no strength to bear them, then turn with your whole heart to the Lord, the Mother of God, St. Nicholas and your patron saint, whose name you bear from holy baptism, and with time and patience, the sorrow will become lighter."

To my question: "Is it possible to allow no one access to my soul?" he replied: "It's impossible not to have any kind of relationships, for then there would be an absence of simplicity in your soul. But it is said, *Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord* (Heb. 12:14). Holiness—this is simplicity, appearing prudently before people. Discernment is higher than all the virtues. Seriousness and amiability can be combined, with the exception of certain circumstances, which will be revealed in due time, and which will compel you to be either more serious or more amiable.

"In difficult moments, when your easy, worldly life comes clearly back to mind, it's better to recall God's holy Name more often and beg for help; for what is sinful is consequently dangerous for the soul. It's better, even mentally, to make an effort not to go backwards.

"According to the inscrutable judgments of God it is not beneficial to everyone to live in the world. And whoever overcomes his inclinations, withdrawing to a monastery, since it is easier to be saved there, hears the voice of God's revelation: *To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne* (Apoc. 3:21)."

This trip to Optina strengthened me even more.

After a few days I left for the Altai and entered the monastery indicated to me by the Elder, Metropolitan Macarius.

This is how wondrously the words spoken by Elder Nektary were fulfilled: "I see the grace of God close to you—you'll be a nun." Then I was surprised and did not believe it, but two

months after this conversation I was already actually dressed in monastic garb. I thank the Lord, Who gave me the wisdom to travel to that "grace-filled little corner"—to Optina Monastery. Had I not gone there, I would not be living in a monastery, and would still have been tossed about on the stormy waves of the sea of life. Glory be to God for all things.

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The notes of Archpriest Basil Shoustin,* published during his stay in Serbia in 1929, refer to the very beginning of Fr. Nektary's time as an Elder.

These are personal recollections about Fr. John of Kronstadt and Elders Barsanuphius and Nektary, with whom Fr. Basil, then Basil Vasilievich, a student at the technological institute, was very close.

Fr. Barsanuphius had introduced him to a young woman who was preparing to enter a monastery, and told her to marry him. This was also totally unexpected for Basil Vasilievich. Fr. Barsanuphius died soon after this. As soon as they were married, on that very day, the young people set out for Optina to

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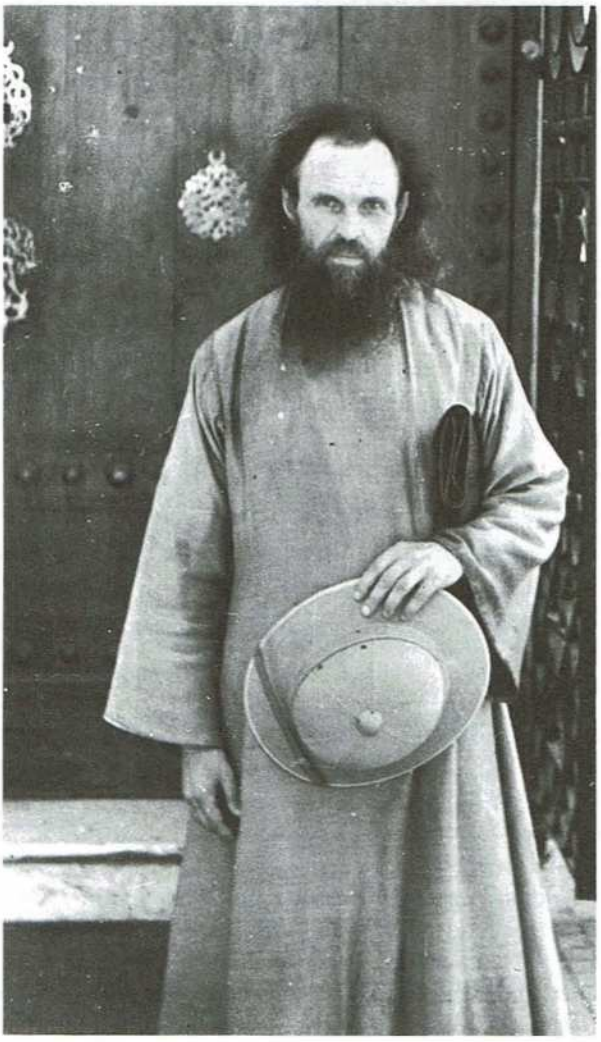
* Archpriest Basil Vasilievich Shoustin (May 18, 1886-July 24, 1968) was from a pious family. He became acquainted with and received spiritual direction from St. John of Kronstadt and the Optina Elders and was the spiritual son of Elder Barsanuphius. He took part in World War I and fought in the volunteer army during the civil war. In the emigration he taught physics in Yugoslavia. He was ordained a priest in 1930. For thirty years he was the head priest of an Orthodox parish in Algiers. Archpriest Basil continued his interest in Optina in the emigration, and at the behest of Hieromonk John (Prince) Shahovskoy (later Bishop of San Francisco), dictated his reminiscences to the latter, who published them through his own publishing enterprise. (Fr. Basil Shoustin, *Notes on Fr. John of Kronstadt and the Optina Elders,* White Church, 1929.) Fr. Basil performed the wedding of Ivan and Helen Kontzevitch, who travelled to Algiers specifically to be married by an Optina disciple.—Ed.



Fr. Basil Shoustin.

pay their first wedding visit to him, according to his testament, at his grave. We present the narrative of this trip in full:

Having arrived in Optina, we had a Pannikhida served, wept, mourned, and asked the hieromonk that was serving who the Elder was now. "Fr. Nektary," he replied. I instantly understood why Fr. Barsanuphius, when he left the Skete, had sent me to Fr. Nektary—so that I might become more closely acquainted with him. He was already indicating to me in advance, who should guide me after his death. We decided to go see him after lunch. Everyone looked at us with curiosity, since news of our unique marriage had spread throughout Optina. This had indeed been Fr. Barsanuphius' pre-death blessing. And so, at three o'clock, we went along the familiar little road to the Skete. Fr. Nektary occupied Fr. Joseph's quarters, on the right side of the gates. My wife and I separated. She went to the porch outside the skete walls and I proceeded into the Skete. The cell-attendant, seeing me, recognized me. He was formerly Elder Joseph's cell-attendant. He straightway announced me to Fr. Nektary. After ten minutes the Elder came out with a joyful smile.

Fr. Nektary, in contrast to Fr. Barsanuphius, was short of stature, stooped over, thin, with a small wedge-shaped beard, and constantly weeping eyes. Therefore he always had a handkerchief in his hand, which he rolled up, dabbing his eyes with a corner. He blessed me and invited me in after him. He led me to the room where he heard confessions, and I saw my wife there. She arose and came over to me, and the Elder bowed from the waist and said, "What a joy, what a joy. I was sad and despondent but now I'm happy," and his face shone with a childlike smile. "Well, how can I receive you now? Here—you sit together on the couch," and Batiushka sat opposite us...."You see, the great Elder has blessed you.... Elder Barsanuphius was so

great that I stand no higher than the end of his little toenail. From a brilliant soldier, by God's blessing, he became a great Elder overnight. Only now, after his death, can I tell you about his wondrous conversion, which he kept secret." And Fr. Nektary related the story of Fr. Barsanuphius' conversion. "See how great Elder Barsanuphius was! And he was remarkably humble and obedient. Once, when he was a novice, he was walking past my porch and I said to him as a little joke: 'You have exactly twenty years to live.' I said it to him as a joke, but he was obedient and exactly twenty years later, on that very day—April 1—he reposed. That's how great his obedience was." I shuddered involuntarily before Fr. Nektary's power. He continued, "Remember 'blessed Schema-archimandrite Barsanuphius' in your prayers. Only commemorate him 'in blessed memory' for three years, and then just as 'Schema-archimandrite Barsanuphius.' Right now he's among the blessed.... Seek great meaning in everything. All events that take place around us and with us have their own meaning. Nothing happens without a reason.... That's why your visit is a great joy. I had been sad and despondent. All the people come with woes and suffering, but you have only joy. This is the visitation of an angel.... Right now I have many visitors and I can't receive you as I should. Go home now and come at six in the evening, when the Vigil begins and all the monks go to church. I'll send my cell-attendant too, but you come. Let the others pray, but we'll pass the time here." He blessed us, and we again separated—I left through the Skete and my wife left through the outside porch.

When they had finished ringing for the Vigil, my wife and I set out for the Skete. The door to the Elder's house was locked. I knocked, and Fr. Nektary himself opened it. Then he let my wife in and again seated us together in his confession room. "You young people have come to see me and, as a host, I must meet you according to your custom. Sit here a little while."

Having said this, the Elder withdrew. In a short while he carried in a tray with two wine glasses containing some dark liquid. He brought it over to us, stopped, and bowing to us, said: "I congratulate you with your marriage, and I offer you a drink to your health." We looked at the Elder with surprise. Then we took the wine glasses, clinked them together, and began to drink. But after taking a sip I stopped at once, and my wife did likewise. Whatever was in the wine glasses was terribly bitter. I said to him, "It's bitter," and my wife also turned away from it. Suddenly I was stunned by the very word "bitter" that I had pronounced, and pictured how at marriage feasts they yell, "It's bitter!" and I burst out laughing.* The Elder read my thoughts and laughed. "But," he said, "though it's bitter, you have to drink it. Make note that everything I do has a hidden meaning which you have to grasp; but now, drink up." And we, with grimaces, encouraging one another, drank up that liquid. Fr. Nektary brought in an open can of sardines and told us to empty it. After the bitter drink we ate the sardines and he carried everything out.

He came back again, sat opposite us and said, "I've caught some lightning. Become wiser and you'll figure it out—if you want, I'll show you. He walked up to the shelf, took out an electric light, wrapped it in red paper and began to turn it on and off, flashing the light. "Isn't that lightning? It's just like lightning!" And he, smiling, put the light on the shelf and took out a wooden mushroom, placed it on the table, removed the top, poured out five-rouble gold coins and said, "Look how they shine! I polished them. There are twenty of them here—one hundred rubles." Well, what of it? I looked at how they shone

* It is an old Russian custom at wedding feasts, that when the guests want to wish the couple marital bliss they shout "It's bitter!" so as to evoke the sweetness of a kiss. It is a form of well-wishing and confirms the agreement of the marriage.—Ed.

and that was enough. One glance was plenty. He gathered up the money and put it away. Then the Elder said something else. Then he went out again. We looked, and he again brought in two large wine glasses, this time containing a bright yellow liquid and, with the same ceremony and bow, brought it over to us. We took the wine glasses, looked at them, but for a long time could not make up our minds to drink them. The Elder, looking at us, smiled. We tried it. To our joy, it was a pleasant drink, sweet and aromatic, and we finished it with pleasure. This drink was even a little intoxicating. For a snack he brought in chocolate candies, very rich and very many, and he told us to eat them all. We were really terrified. But he sat down beside us and began to eat. I looked at Fr. Nektary and thought: "How is it that he's eating chocolate when in fact, according to the Skete rule, milk products were not allowed?" But he looked at me, ate, and offered some to me. Thus I remained bewildered. He told us that we had to eat all that chocolate without fail, and then he himself went to set the samovar to boil....

At eleven o'clock Fr. Nektary led us to the outside porch and gave us a kerosene lantern so we could follow the path and not get lost in the woods. As he bid us farewell he invited us to come at six on the following day. Around us stood the forest in stillness, and terror seized us. We tried to reach the guesthouse quickly. The worshippers were emerging from the Vigil and we, unnoticed, entered the guesthouse with them.

The next day, at six in the evening, we again came to see him. This time the cell-attendant was home, but the Elder forbade him to go out of his cell. He again invited us together into his confession room, seated us, gave my wife a variety of artificial flowers to remember him by, and said, "When you walk through life's field, pick flowers, gather a whole bouquet, and you'll receive the fruit later." We didn't understand what he was alluding to here, since he never did or said anything idly.

Later, he explained it to me: "The flowers are sorrows and misfortunes. You have to gather them and you'll have a wondrous bouquet, with which you'll appear on the day of judgment, and then you'll receive the fruit—joy. Married life," he further stated, "has two periods—one is happy, and the other is sorrowful, bitter. It's always best when the bitter period happens earlier, at the beginning of married life, and then there will be happiness."

Then the Elder turned to me and said, "Let's go now, and I'll teach you how to set the samovar to boil. The time will come when you won't have servants and you'll experience want, and you will have to set the samovar to boil yourself." I looked at him with surprise and thought, "What is he saying? Where will our fortune disappear to?" He took me by the hand and led me into the storeroom, where there was firewood, along with various other things. Then he stood the samovar by the exhaust pipe. Fr. Nektary said to me, "Shake out the samovar first, then pour water into it. You know, people often forget to pour the water in and they light the samovar, with the result that the samovar is ruined and they're left without tea. The water is standing right there in the corner, in the copper jug. Take it and pour it in." I went up to the jug but it was very large, holding over five gallons, and was itself massive, being made of copper. I tried to move it but couldn't; I had no strength. Then I wanted to bring the samovar over and draw out the water, but the Elder saw my intention and again repeated, "Take the jug and pour the water into the samovar." "But really, Batiushka, it's too heavy for me and I can't move it from its place." Then he walked over to the jug, made the sign of the Cross over it and said, "Take it." I lifted it and looked at him with surprise—the jug felt quite light to me, as if it didn't weigh anything. I poured the water into the samovar and put the jug back with an astonished expression on my face. Batiushka asked me, "Well, how

about it—was the jug heavy?" "No, Batiushka, I'm amazed; it's quite light." "Then take a lesson, that any obedience that seems difficult to us will be very easy when we fulfill it, because it's done as an obedience." But I was frankly astounded at how he did away with the force of gravity by the sign of the Cross alone! As if nothing had happened, Fr. Nektary continued, telling me to split some kindling, light it, and then put the coals in. While the samovar was heating and I sat beside him, he lit a kerosene stove and began to cook apple skins in a small pot. Pointing to it, he said to me, "This is my food—I feed myself on this alone. When benefactors bring me fruit, I ask them to eat the fruit and peel them, and I cook the peels for myself...." He made the tea himself, and it was remarkably aromatic, with a strong honey-like scent. He poured the tea for us himself and left.

It was at this time, after evening prayers, that the skete brethren came to him for a blessing before they went to sleep. This was done each day, morning and evening. The monks all came up for a blessing and bowed, and some of them openly confessed their thoughts and misgivings. Fr. Nektary, as an Elder, a guide of souls, comforted and cheered some of them; for others he absolved their sins after confession, resolved doubts and, having brought peace to them, lovingly dismissed them. This was a moving sight and, during the blessings, the Elder had an extraordinarily serious and concentrated look. His every word was permeated with care and love for each restless soul. Following the blessing he retired to his cell and prayed for about an hour. After his long absence he returned to us and removed everything from the table in silence.

On one of my trips to Optina Monastery I saw Fr. Nektary reading sealed letters. He came out to me with the letters he had received, of which there were fifty, and, without opening them, began to sort them out. He set aside one letter with the words, "This one I need to answer, but these are letters of thanks and I

can leave them without an answer." He had not read them, but had seen their contents. Certain ones he blessed, and some he kissed, but two letters, as if by chance, he gave to my wife and said, "Here, read these aloud. This will be useful." I have forgotten the contents of one, but the other was from a student of the Women's College. She was begging the Elder to pray for her, because she was tormented and could in no way control herself. She had fallen in love with a priest, who had attracted her by his fiery sermons. She had cast aside her studies and was running to him with every kind of nonsense, and deliberately prepared for Holy Communion often, only so she could touch him. She did not sleep at night. The Elder said about this letter, "You know this priest, and have had dealings with him. He will later hold a very important post, one which hasn't even occurred to him. He still knows nothing about this, but will receive this authority as a result of the fact that he will deviate from the truth." "What priest is this," I thought, "who is so well-known to me?" Then he said that it was the student of the Theological Academy who had come with me on my first trip to Optina and who had proposed to my sister. But the Lord had preserved my sister through Elder Barsanuphius, for he had broken up this proposed marriage.... (He might now be in the renovationist church, wielding authority there.) Sorting the letters, Fr. Nektary said, "You see, they call me an Elder. What kind of Elder am I? When I receive more than a hundred letters a day, like Fr. Barsanuphius, then they can call me an Elder, when I have that many spiritual children." Taking away the letters, he brought them to his secretary.

Fr. Nektary advised my father to sell his house in Petersburg and his summer home in Finland since, as he said, everything would fall apart. But my father did not believe him and did not sell anything. This was at the beginning of the Great War.

In 1914, my older brother became a novice in the Optina Skete and occasionally had the position of cell-attendant to Fr. Nektary. He often sent my father letters with a request to send him money, since he was buying a variety of books of spiritual content and was putting together a spiritual library. I was always outraged at this and said that, now that he had left the world, according to his calling, he should make a break with his passions. And my brother had such a passion—buying books. I wrote Fr. Nektary a letter, and a fairly sharp one, expressing my indignation and surprise. He did not answer. My brother continued to send his requests and, occasionally, outright demands. Then I wrote the Elder an even sharper letter, accusing him of not suppressing my brother's passions, but catering to them. He again did not answer. And then, when I was on leave from the front, I succeeded in travelling with my wife to Optina. This was already in 1917, at the time of the Provisional Government. We arrived at the Monastery and Fr. Nektary met us with a low, low bow and said, "Thank you for your sincerity. You wrote without any embellishments concerning what was on your soul, what was disturbing you. I knew that after these letters you yourself would visit, and I'm always happy to see you. You write such letters ahead of time and you appear after them yourself for the answer. So now I'm telling you that there will soon be a famine of spiritual books. You won't be able to obtain spiritual books. It's good that he's collecting this spiritual library—a spiritual treasury. It will come in very, very handy. A grievous time is coming now. In the world the number six has past and the number seven is approaching.* The age of silence is approaching. Be silent, be silent," said the Elder, and tears flowed from his eyes.... "And the Tsar is beside himself; how much humiliation he is now

* This refers to the seven seals of the book of the Apocalypse (Apoc. 8, 9).—Ed.

enduring for his mistakes. The year 1918 will be even worse. The Tsar and his whole family will be killed, tormented. One pious young woman had a dream: Jesus Christ was sitting on a throne, and near Him were the twelve Apostles; and horrible torment and groans could be heard from the earth. And the Apostle Peter asked Christ, 'O Lord, when will these punishments cease?' And Jesus Christ answered him, 'I will give them until 1922, but if the people do not repent, do not come to their senses, then all will perish in this way.' Suddenly our Emperor was standing before the throne of God with the crown of a great martyr. Yes, this Tsar will be a great martyr. He has redeemed his life of late, and if people do not turn to God, then not only Russia, but all of Europe will collapse.... The time for prayer has come. While you're working, say the Jesus Prayer. At first with your lips, then with your mind and finally, it will go on by itself in your heart.... "

He retired to his cell and prayed there for an hour and a half. After his prayers he came out to us in a concentrated state, sat down, took me by the hand and said, "I know a great deal about you, but not all knowledge would be good for you. A time of famine is coming, you will be hungry.... The time is coming when they will destroy our Monastery. Perhaps I'll come to you at the farm. Receive me then; for Christ's sake, don't refuse me. I'll have no place to go.... "

This was my last meeting with the Elder.

I recall yet another incident with Fr. Nektary. On one of our visits to Optina my wife painted a picture. It was a view of the river and its low-lying bank from the Monastery at sunset, with an absolutely clear sky and a brilliant play of color. She placed her painting on the open balcony and went for a walk with me through the forest. Along the way we had a serious argument, so that we became quite upset and did not even want to look at one another. We returned home and the painting immediately

Elder Theodosius of Optina.

caught our eye—instead of clear skies, storm clouds and lightning were drawn in. We were stunned. We came closer and began to inspect it. The paint was quite fresh—it had only just been applied. We summoned the girl who lived with us and asked her who had come to see us. She replied that some short monk had been doing something there on the balcony. We thought and thought about who it could have been, and from a more detailed description of the monk and after questioning others, we guessed that it had been Fr. Nektary. It was he, a master of the brush, who had symbolically depicted my wife's and my spiritual state. That storm with lightning produced such an impression on us that we forgot our argument and made peace, for we wanted the skies of our life to brighten up again and become completely pure and clear.

* * *

I* personally had occasion to be in Optina Monastery at a later period than Fr. Basil Shoustin, during the first World War, to be exact.

The literature teacher at our high school had told us at our lessons how, thanks to the Elders, Gogol had burned his work of genius, the second part of *Dead Souls.*** This aroused in me a prejudice against Elders in general.

But then the war began in 1914. My brother Vladimir was exceptionally gifted, and all who knew him, without exception, loved the "pride of our family." He was deeply upset by the trials that had befallen our homeland and, having enlisted in the army with the blessing of our parents, was soon killed in the autumn of 1914, before he was even nineteen years old. This was a pure sacrifice to God—he "laid down his life for his

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* I. M. Kontzevitch.

** A truthful explanation of this incident and its psychological analysis was first given by Professor of Philosophy and Doctor of Psychiatry I. M. Andreyev in the magazine *The Orthodox Way,* Jordanville, 1952.

friends" (cf. John 15:13). His death led our family to Optina Monastery.

When we sought consolation in spiritual things, we "accidentally" stumbled upon Bykov's book, *Calm Havens for the Respite of a Suffering Soul,* in which Optina and its Elders are described, about whom we had known nothing until then.

At the first opportunity, as soon as vacation began at the university where I was studying, I went to Optina. I stayed there for two months. This was in 1916. The following year, also in the summer, I spent two weeks there. Later, when I was abroad, I was able to have written contact with Fr. Nektary up to his death.

Besides me, several of my acquaintances and friends were benefitted by the spiritual direction of the Elder. His blessing always led to success, no matter what kind of difficulties there were. Disobedience was never free of consequences.

The Monastery and the Elders made an unexpected and irresistible impression on me, impossible to convey in words—it can be comprehended only through personal experience. Here the grace of God, the sanctity of the place, and the presence of God could be clearly felt. This aroused feelings of reverence and accountability for one's every thought, word, or action, the fear of falling into error or *prelest,* and the fear of any kind of egotism or anything "self-concocted." Such a state could be called "walking before God."

Here the spiritual world was first opened to me and, as its antithesis, I was shown "the depths of satan." Here I was spiritually born.

At that time the Elders in Optina were, in the Monastery itself, Fr. Anatole, and in the Skete, Fr. Theodosius and Fr. Nektary. Anatole the comforter, Theodosius the wise, and wondrous Nektary—according to the definition of a priest who was close to Optina.

Many people always crowded under the shelter of Fr. Anatole's "hut." Fr. Anatole usually came out and blessed each person with a short, quick sign of the Cross, lightly striking their foreheads with his fingers several times, as if implanting and imprinting the sign of the Cross. Short, unusually lively and quick in his movements, after making the rounds he would answer the questions that were put to him, and would then receive a few people separately for talks in his cell. His love and affectionate treatment always attracted crowds of people to Fr. Anatole. I remember how, when he was sick, Fr. Anatole did not leave his cell, but only went up to his window and blessed the people through the glass, who were gathered outside in a tight group. Seeing him, the whole crowd would fall to the earth.

Fr. Nektary, on the other hand, had few visitors. He lived in seclusion in the Skete in Fr. Ambrose's cell and often did not come out for a long time. He blessed with a broad sign of the Cross; he was slow and concentrated in his movements. It seemed as though he were carrying a cup filled to the brim with a precious drink, as if he were afraid of spilling it. Some book often lay on the table in his reception room, opened to a particular page. The rare visitor, during his long wait, would begin to read this book, not suspecting that it was one of Fr. Nektary's methods to give, through an open book, a warning, instruction, or the answer to a question, thus concealing his clairvoyance.

He knew how to surround himself with mystery, to keep himself in the shadows, to be little-noticed. There are no photographs of him. He never had his picture taken—this was very characteristic of him.*

* That is, he never allowed his "official" portrait-photograph to be taken. The only exception that the author knew of was the photograph of the Elder in his coffin, which the author himself was in possession of. The few other photographs printed in this book have only recently been unearthed.—Ed.

4. THE END OF OPTINA MONASTERY

Optina Monastery held out until 1923, when its doors were officially closed.

In one of her letters nun Nektaria said concerning Elder Anatole (Potapov): "He suffered much." We learned from the late Archpriest Solodovnikov that members of the red guard shaved, tortured and mocked him. A day before his death they came to arrest him. But the Elder requested a postponement of twenty-four hours, and during that interval went to the Lord.

A detailed history of Optina after the revolution is unknown to us, although fragmented information has occasionally reached us. One witness related that nuns flew down to Optina like birds from ravaged nests, in proportion to the liquidation of women's monasteries. They had nowhere to go and they cooped themselves up there. Crowds of people also brought their woes there. They asked how to pray for their close ones who had not returned. The horrors of the revolution and civil war inflicted losses upon almost every family.

After a long break, Alexandra Kontzevitch (subsequently nun Nektaria) came to Optina with her teenage son.

"In 1922, when I was in Optina for the first time with Mother," related Oleg,* "Elder Anatole was still alive. We had

* Oleg Kontzevitch, the author's brother, later emigrated to the United States, where he was tonsured a monk with the name Nektary, after Elder Nektary. He was eventually made Bishop of Seattle. He reposed on January 24/February 6, 1983, the day of the commemoration of Blessed Xenia of Petersburg, whom he greatly venerated. That same Sunday was the commemoration of the New Martys of Russia, concerning whom he witnessed, and about whom he submitted information which contributed to their canonization by the Russian Church Outside of Russia; Bishop Nektary was the only bishop present who had actually been a member of the persecuted Russian Church under the tyranny of the communists. For his recollections of Elder Nektary, see p. 306.—Ed.

still had no news about you,* and Mother asked Fr. Anatole how to pray for you—for your health or for your repose. Fr. Anatole asked Mother if she had had any dreams about you. She replied that she had seen a dream in which her sons were riding horses—first the reposed Volodya, and then you. But the horses were of different colors. Fr. Anatole said, 'Well, there you have it! God is merciful—pray for his health, God is merciful!' Mother thought that Fr. Anatole was only trying to console her.

"After visiting Fr. Anatole we went to see Fr. Nektary. Mother asked the Elder a series of questions about her daughters, herself and me, but she said nothing about you, since she knew that one must not address the same question to two elders. I didn't know this and, assuming that Mother had forgotten to ask about you, pestered her the whole time, saying to her, 'And what about Vanya? What about Vanya?' Mother continued not to ask. Then Batiushka said to her after one of my 'What about Vanyas': 'He's alive. Pray for his health. You'll soon receive news of him. It has not been profitable for you to know about him.' We came home and Mother rushed to see Fr. Nicholas (Zagorovsky) to inform him that Vanya was alive. His wife, Matushka Ekaterina Ivanovna, seeing Mother through the window, went out to meet her with the words, 'You have a letter from Vanya!'"

"Glory to the Heavenly Creator! You're alive!" wrote nun Nektaria to her son. "We learned of your being alive three days before receiving your letter, from Fr. Nektary. We returned from Optina on July 14, and on the 15th we received your letter to Dyoma. Fr. Nektary had said, 'He's alive, pray for his health; you'll find out about him. It was not profitable for you to know about him yet—resign yourself to necessity.'

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* That is, about the author, Oleg's brother.—Ed.

"Elder Theodosius has reposed (1920); Elder Anatole is alive*—he has suffered much and now receives people in his cell (only in the other one). Fr. Joseph is in the same building.** He had dislocated his leg and is quite grieved that he has been unable to serve for two years. He was greatly gladdened by our arrival."

And in a letter of April 26, 1924, she writes:

"I am sending you Fr. Joseph's letter. He exists altogether by God's wondrous grace. He senses this and is filled with joy in the Lord. The Most Wise and Most Good Lord has prudently arranged everything concerning him. His being an invalid has served for his well-being—no one touches him [that is, he was not arrested].

"Many signs are being worked here—cupolas are renewing themselves, blood has flowed from the holy cross, and blasphemers are punished by being struck dumb and dying. Unfortunately, the people on the whole are not coming to their senses, and the Lord is sending His chastisements. Again the drought-stricken autumn has caused the sown grain to be devoured by worms. Those who believe unshakably in the Lord and hope in Him, the Lord showers with His mercy and munificence."

Yet another incident is connected with the last days of Optina's liquidation. A certain Baron Michael Mikhailovich Taube, a Protestant with a university education, was sent there by the soviet authorities. He had been directed to dismantle the Optina library. (It was subsequently sold by the bolsheviks to foreign booksellers.) When Taube arrived in

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* Fr. Anatole reposed fifteen days later, on July 30, 1922.

** Fr. Hieroschema-monk Joseph Polevoy, who is mentioned more than once here, was born in 1852. In the world he was a bank director in Moscow. He went to Optina in his 46th year and lived through its destruction.

Optina and started to busy himself in the library, he began to take a closer look at everything, became acquainted with Fr. Joseph (Polevoy) and then became more and more interested in Optina's life and its Elders. He also made his way to Fr. Nektary. No one knows the details of this meeting. Only the result remains as a witness: a Saul was turned into a Paul. The Elder brought Michael Mikhailovich together with his confessor, Fr. Dositheus—the "young elder,"* of whom we will speak further—and with Fr. Agapit (a friend of Elder Ambrose, a profound Elder, a doer of the Jesus Prayer, who revealed the incorrect teaching about the Jesus Prayer in schema-monk Iliodore's book, *In the Mountains of the Caucasus*). He entered into a close association with Fr. Dositheus and became Orthodox. Remaining to work in the museum, Taube became Dositheus' novice. He was tonsured in Kozelsk with the name Agapit. While he still lived in Optina he was lodged in the tower over the gate that led to the Skete. There lay in his cell only one board—his bed. He was a doer of the Jesus Prayer. He was in exile together with Fr. Dositheus and returned with him to Orel. He soon thereafter became ill and reposed.

Nun Nektaria was present during the closing of Optina in 1923. This occurred in the following way:**

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* Hieromonk Dositheus (Chuguryukin) was a native of the Orel province. He was an educated man and clairvoyant. He was a disciple of Elder Anatole (Zertsalov) and later of Archimandrite Agapit (Belovidov). He bore the obedience of medical assistant in the Monastery, and was was the confessor of the Optina brethren after their banishment from Kozelsk. He was arrested in 1929 and exiled to Siberia. After his exile he lived in Orel. There he was arrested for the second time and again exiled. His fate after this is unknown.—Ed.

** From a letter to the author from his brother Oleg (Bishop Nektary).—Ed.

Mother, leaving Optina, had the habit of asking the Elder when he would bless her to come the next time. He replied, "Come during the seventh week (of Great Lent); you'll live here for two weeks and you won't regret it." Fr. Nektary smiled when he said this, and was very affectionate. I was in school at that time and was unable to go with Mother, so she went alone, having made arrangements that I come before Pascha. Arriving in Kozelsk, she learned from a woman at the train station that there were no services in Optina, that a liquidation committee was at work in the Monastery, that Bishop Micah, Fr. Isaac (the Superior), the treasurer and others had been arrested, and that Fr. Nektary had also been arrested and was in the prison hospital in Kozelsk. Learning all this, Mother nonetheless decided to go to the Monastery, mentally addressing the Elder with the request that he direct her and indicate to her to whom she should go, to whom she should confess, etc. Praying thus to him, she set out for the cell of Fr. Joseph (Polevoy), the crippled hieromonk. Mother knocked on the door, which was opened by a member of the komsomol armed with a rifle. "Who are you here to see?"

"Fr. Joseph."

"Where are you from?"

"From N—sk."

"What have you come here for?"

"I've come to the Monastery to pray to God."

"You found out that the Monastery is being closed and you've come running for your gold! Step in, please!" And they arrested Mother.

In that building were the arrested people that I enumerated earlier, as well as others. Each occupied a separate cell. There were no separate quarters available for Mama, so they seated her beside the sentry in the corridor. It was already evening, and they told Mother that they were sending her to Kozelsk for an investigation. Mother sat and prayed, believing the Elder's words, that she would be there "for two weeks,

and would not regret it." Late evening came, and then night. The komsomol sentry was dozing off, was battling sleep; he had difficulty staying awake and wanted very much to sleep. Mother began to feel sorry for him and kindly told him that he should lie down on the bench, and that if anyone came she would wake him. Sensing that he could trust her, the sentry fell into a sound sleep. Mother guarded him. It was long after midnight. She prayed. Suddenly the door of one of the cells opened quietly, revealing a gray-haired old man, Bishop Micah. He called her over with a sign and asked her if she wished to have Confession and receive Holy Communion—he had the Holy Gifts with him. Mother agreed with joy, entered the cell, confessed and communed, and returned, in seventh heaven, to guard the sleeping sentry. Fr. Nektary had heard her prayerful request! Absolutely convinced that she "would not regret" that she had come to Optina, she calmly awaited the morning. In the morning they sent her to the Kozelsk prison. They led her to be interrogated several times, suspecting that she had come to Optina on some sort of secret business. They were preparing to send her under guard to her place of residence, but due to the lack of available convoys they cancelled their plan. They let her go on the morning of Passion Thursday, warning her not to set foot in Kozelsk. Mama went to the market and spoke with one of the peasants. He turned out to be a forest ranger. He had a hut approximately half a mile downstream from the Monastery along the Zhizdra. He invited Mother to stay with him. She bought everything needed for the Feast at the market and went to his place. They came for services to Kozelsk, where church services were still being held. Then Mother learned that they were searching for her in Kozelsk and in Optina but, having changed into the clothes of the forest ranger's wife, she was unrecognizable. On Friday or Saturday, according to our arrangement, she met me at the railroad station. I didn't recognize her in peasant garb—in high felt boots, and a sheepskin coat, wrapped in a large kerchief (it was an early

Pascha). Mother and I greeted Pascha in Kozelsk. We spent Bright Week at the ranger's. It was quite interesting. Wolves came right up to the hut and howled at night.

Thus Mother Nektaria partook of the cup of the confessors of Optina and, together with them, was counted as an evildoer. As a result it turned out as Elder Nektary had said—"You'll be there for two weeks and you won't regret it."

Optina was closed by the bolsheviks on Thomas Sunday in 1923. The churches were locked. Fr. Nektary was arrested and moved to Kozelsk. Mother Nektaria's notes concerning this moment have been preserved. "The Elder had never allowed anyone into his cell, so that the cell-attendants did not know what was in there. When they came to take inventory of his possessions, even the cell-attendants were going in for the first time. And what did they see? Children's toys! Dolls, balls, lanterns and small baskets! Those who were taking inventory asked, 'What are these children's toys for?' And he replied, 'I, myself, am like a child.' They found church wine and canned foods, and he said to them, 'Drink up and eat.' And they drank up the wine. At the time of his arrest his eye was swollen and they placed him at first in the monastery infirmary, and then in the prison hospital. When he rode out of the Monastery (on a sleigh) his last words were, 'Give me a hand,'—this was so that they would help him up into the sleigh. He sat down, blessed the road ahead, and left. We were there then but we didn't see him."

In 1935, in Algiers, we heard from Fr. Basil Shoustin about an incident which was conveyed to him by one of the emigrants. After Fr. Nektary's departure from Optina the bolsheviks brought some kind of occultist into his cell to discover if, as they thought, there were any treasures hidden there. It is well known that they make extensive use of occult powers for their purposes. It was night, and a kerosene lamp was burning in the

cell. The sorcerer-occultist began his sorcery and, although the lamp continued to burn, darkness came upon the room. There was a nun there—there were many at that time in Optina. She took Fr. Nektary's prayer rope and made the sign of the Cross with it. It immediately became light, and the sorcerer was writhing around on the ground in the convulsions of an epileptic fit.

After his release from prison, Fr. Nektary lived at first in the village of Plokhino in the vicinity of Kozelsk, but then he moved thirty miles away, to the village of Kholmishche. "The mercy of God is infinite towards those who love Him. Now it is more peaceful for him than it was in the Skete. In recent times a multitude of people had been coming to him (for the most part, nuns). He confessed them all, blessed them, and was obviously becoming tired. Besides that, he was the Superior of the Skete. Now it was far more peaceful for him. He had two bright rooms and a front room. It was warm; a monk cooked his food and his host read the prayer-rule. Visitors came quite rarely. He was so radiant and joyful—all filled with grace. The reflection of this heavenly joy was poured out also upon those who came to him, and everyone left him consoled and at peace."

Thus wrote Mother Nektaria, and she further confirmed it in her letter of December 1, 1923: "'Grandfather' (that is, Fr. Nektary) lives in a village with a peasant. He has two nice rooms—a bedroom and a reception room, and his cell-attendant Peter lives with him. He looks after him and his host works for next to nothing. The little house is very nice—high ceilings, large windows, bright and cozy. There is as much firewood in the forest as you could wish for—just go out and gather it. Close ones and acquaintances from everywhere visit Grandfather constantly. I lived with a widowed priest's wife close to Grandfather for two months and saw him often. Oleg brought me there and then came for me."

But the Elder by no means lived peacefully and well all the time. From another source we heard that his host, a coarse materialist, quickly became insolent (one eyewitness was amazed that the Elder had settled with such a man!) and began to oppress him, but the authorities oppressed him even more, extorting money. "They are harassing Grandfather," wrote Mother Nektaria. "Pray for him every day. The last time I was with him he said, 'Everything—everything is going badly with me.' It's clear that he foresaw how they would oppress him and his host."

"This summer they threatened him with [exile to] Kamchatka, and he joked with Oleg—'What is this Kamchatka? Haven't I encountered it somewhere in geography?'" In another letter: "He asked me to pray for him, since he doesn't want to go to Kamchatka." "Grandfather invited me to stay for a longer time during vacation and gave me permission to visit him at Pascha if we will be in Optina. This time Oleg managed, after much effort, to obtain tickets for himself and me, and we went by train in a third-class car. I don't know how it will be at Pascha and for the next vacation—whether we will be able to get tickets. But, in any case, I live by the thought that Grandfather will still be alive and that I will see him. Grandfather has become very sad of late, and has said that 'Everything—everything is bad' with him. I don't know if it is his own tribulation of soul or if he is suffering for the world, but I do know that he is very sorrowful; and I beg you to remember him earnestly in your prayers and take out a particle for him" (commemorate him at the *proskomedia*).

In autumn of 1927 the bolsheviks imposed an especially heavy tax on Denezhkin (the owner of the house in which Fr. Nektary lived). Someone informed a priest, Fr. Adrian Rymarenko, about this, begging him to take up a collection among the residents of Kiev. His wife, Matushka Evgenia Grigorievna brought Fr. Nektary a very large load, with provisions and

money that had been collected for him. This had entailed an extraordinary amount of difficulty. She managed secretly to give Fr. Nektary everything she had brought—so that not even the landlord saw it. Fr. Nektary then blessed their family with an icon of St. Seraphim and sent Fr. Adrian a pectoral cross.

Thus Fr. Nektary's last years were a continuous bearing of the Cross, and he was pressed in from all sides. To this one must add his deep old age and the illnesses bound up with it. But even at that time the clarity of his spirit did not abandon him. Mother Nektaria states, "At Grandfather's everything was special—you would never know what to ask about—and thus your lips would be barred and you wouldn't ask anything, no matter how much you wanted to. Or he would answer with a joke. When we were with him in the autumn he spoke with us for a very long time and joked a lot with Oleg and called him 'the right teacher for him,' and said that he wanted to borrow some of his erudition and join him in scholarship. In general he laughed a great deal and made us laugh, and it was already three in the morning when he quickly blessed us to leave. I had not asked everything I had wanted to, but it was not without reason—it meant that he did not want to answer those things. If you would sometimes forget to ask something, he would suddenly say it himself.... He had attained to the highest grace-filled gifts, but knew how to conceal them, so that even those around him knew absolutely nothing about them and sometimes tried to deceive him; but he did not betray, even by appearance, that he knew everything."

To make one's way from the railroad station to the village of Kholmishche was at times very hard.... It was particularly difficult during the spring thaw. "I was at Grandfather's. On account of the spring flood and the bad weather I stayed with him for ten days, for which I was endlessly happy. He is already so sickly that it's surprising that he's alive. He barely moves about

on his feet. He sent you his blessing and said, 'May the grace of God assist him, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. At each of his lessons let him utter a short prayer: *Lord, open my mind for this lesson.*'"

One such trip was bound up with the following incident: "Once," relates Oleg, "Mother was in Kholmishche during a terrible flood and tore up her shoes. Learning about this, Batiushka brought a pair of cloth shoes out of his cell, gave them to her and said, 'This is for you as a remembrance, as a consolation, and you'll flaunt them and show them off at Pascha.'

"But it was impossible to walk in them through the melting snow on the way back. She had to start out for the Duminichi railroad station (fifteen miles away) in the old ripped-up shoes. Soon she had to throw them away. Her stockings became shredded, and by the time Mother reached the station she was barefoot. At this point she put Batiushka's shoes on and they warmed her soaked and frozen feet.

"In order to make Batiushka's statement, 'You'll show them off at Pascha,' come true, Mother went to Paschal Matins in these shoes. But later, at home, when she awoke after a rest, it turned out that her only boots were being used by her pupil, Lelya who had put them on and left. Thus, willingly or unwillingly, she had to 'show off' on the day of the Bright Resurrection in Batiushka's gift. Mother later said, 'You don't have to try to help make the Elder's words come true. It happens by itself.' We called those shoes the 'show-off shoes.' She kept them as a keepsake. We buried her in them."

Such heroic travels were repeated. Mother Nektaria writes, "We returned from Grandfather yesterday. Today is Palm Sunday. Spring is in full swing right now—it's warm, the trees are turning green and the sun is shining. The trip to see Grandfather was very difficult. As a result of the flooding of the rivers there were no connections for horses and we made a 45-mile

detour on foot. We walked through water up to our knees, sloshed through impassable mud and slid across frozen hillocks. There were also good roads in places, but in general we became so tired that by the end of the road, walking the last verst, we lay down to rest. But Grandfather consoled us the whole time we were there. There was no one at his place besides us. We spent a day and a half with him."

Then there was another kind of difficulty. "The wolves where we were had greatly multiplied; they had killed off all the livestock on many farms. When Oleg and I were walking to see Grandfather a wolf met us on the road in the forest. He was sitting on the road along which we were travelling, then he politely yielded the way to us, crossed over to the edge of the forest, then sat down again behind us in his former place. It became dark. Oleg was getting a little frightened—we didn't even have a stick. But I did not experience even the slightest fear, having hope in Grandfather's prayers. Wolves are one of the primary afflictions of peasants."

"I received a consoling letter from Mother," wrote Maria.* "She's living quite well there; she often sits at Fr. Nektary's feet and asks whatever she wants." But only a little of what Mother Nektaria heard, sitting at the Elder's feet, has come down to us. We will share this little bit with the reader.

5. THE TEACHINGS OF FR. NEKTARY
(From the Letters of Nun Nektaria)

Grandfather said that, for a woman, marriage is service to the Most Holy Trinity—that is how great the lot of a woman is to be a wife and mother. This was in answer to my question, "In what way would I be able to serve the Lord?" Grandfather

* The author's sister.—Ed.

replied, "From the time that you were joined in lawful wedlock, you have continually been serving the Most Holy Trinity. Lawful wedlock for a woman is the beginning of her service to the Most Holy Trinity."

Grandfather said that it is better for you [the author]to live together with someone else if you can find a quiet, meek and unquarrelsome roommate: *With the elect shalt thou be elect* (Ps. 17:26); but you must leave a bad roommate.

They stole a lot from us! They carried all our winter things and clothes out the window. Fr. Nektary said that, "When they rob us we need not grieve, but should conclude that we have given alms, and that the Lord will return it tenfold." So you shouldn't worry about us.

He said to one acquaintance, when she asked how to love Christ, "Take a lesson from Christ Himself—*That ye love one another, as I have loved you* (John 15:12). First of all you must try to love your neighbor, and from your neighbor the love will pass on to Christ. But you have to love your neighbor sincerely, not with calculation—only then can there be success."

"When your soul is restless and doesn't know what to do, pray and prepare for Holy Communion with total faith."

Grandfather didn't always give complete instructions on how to live. I think this is because he didn't want to impose a yoke, and because those who questioned him could not have endured the responsibility for not fulfilling that which he had commanded them to do. But he always replied to direct questions. For example, when asked what to do about evil thoughts he said, "Repeat Lord, have mercy and you'll see how everything earthly departs." Another time he told me, "Don't pay them any attention." And according to God's mercy, through Grandfather's prayers the thoughts left me.

Grandfather said that "Before, people thanked the Lord; but the present generation has ceased to thank the Lord and

now there is a scarcity of everything; fruit grows poorly and seems to be sickly."

Grandfather advised that if someone does anything good or gives alms, he should say, "By Thy blessing, O Lord, have I accomplished this." *Without Me, ye can do nothing* (John 15:5).

As regards forgotten sins, Grandfather said that you can confess them after Holy Communion, the next time you meet with your confessor.

Grandfather further stated that it's very good when the Lord doesn't listen to your prayers for a long time. You only have to continue to pray and not despair. "Prayer is capital—the longer the capital sits, the greater the interest it will earn. God will send His mercy when it is pleasing to Him, when it is *profitable* for us to receive it. If we have extreme need of something, then we must pray two or three times and must thank God for the fulfillment of our request. Sometimes it takes a year for God to fulfill a petition. You must take an example from Saints Joachim and Anna. They prayed all their lives and did not despair, but were full of hope—and what a consolation the Lord sent them!"

I am sending you Fr. Joseph (Polevoy's) letter, which was sent by Fr. Nektary's secretary. There is a long letter from the Elder in which he gives answers to questions. Among others—"May one argue about religion with one's companions and read religious and antireligious books with them?" He did not permit this, warning that a wound might be inflicted upon one's heart, from which it would be very difficult to be delivered.

"To open the Bible [at random] to see what will be revealed is sinful. In uncertain instances one must not do this, but must only pray three times; no matter what you undertake after this, it will all be beneficial to your soul. But to speculate using the

Bible is sinful—one must only read it for edification in the word of God."

He has told me to tell you that, "A forgotten sin, even if you remember it before receiving Holy Communion, may be confessed later, at another time. Spend the days on which you receive Holy Communion profitably, like this—do not rush about on any kind of business, discharge yourself from responsibilities until midday, abide in prayer, supplication and thanksgiving, and read the Holy Scriptures."

The Elder also said, "Our most grievous afflictions are as the bites of insects compared with the afflictions of the future age."

Imagine my situation—I know that he can read my thoughts, and then some horrible rubbish creeps into my head. I asked, "What should I do?" He said,"Pay no attention!"

I found support in Grandfather for my opinion concerning the superiority of the "royal way" (in other words, to flee extremes in everything, including podvigs). When I lived near him for two months and wasn't doing anything and had the chance to pray and read sacred books, an evil spirit began to attack me fiercely. He filled my mind with such thoughts that I couldn't even look at the icons and was ashamed to sit by Grandfather, since I knew that he could read my thoughts. He answered me regarding these thoughts as I have already written you: 'Pay no attention to them.' But I wanted to make prostrations and, so as not to be self-willed, asked his permission to make a hundred prostrations a day. He smiled and asked, 'And is there zeal?' I said, 'There is.' He gave me permission, and after two or three days he sent me thirty miles away to prepare for Holy Communion. On the way my leg began to hurt and I was in no condition to make even a single prostration. Since that time I have never requested permission for any kind of podvigs."

Grandfather wrote that, "One may have good worldly contact with unbelievers, only one must not have prayerful contact with them, and must not have arguments concerning religion, that the Name of God not be offended in the argument."

I often read the prayer from the Sixth Hour: *For we have no boldness on account of our many sins,* for I believe that in this is the root of our sorrows. Grandfather told me to say, in the face of all failures, "O Lord, I believe that I am enduring what is my due, and that I am receiving what I deserve; but do Thou, O Lord, according to Thy mercy, forgive and have mercy on me." He advised me to repeat this a few times until I feel peace in my soul.

One time Grandfather said, "Pray physically—the Lord God will send His grace to help you." This means to pray with bows from the waist and, when necessary, to the earth as well. Grandfather even stood before the icons, slowly made the sign of the Cross upon himself, bowed low, touching his right hand to the ground, and said to me, "Pray like this."

Pray in such a way that the Lord will reign in your heart—then it will be filled with great jubilation and happiness, and no manner of sorrow will have the power to disturb it. For this purpose Grandfather advised me to pray thus: 'O Lord, open unto me the doors of Thy mercy.'"

Grandfather told me to prepare for tonsure. I was very happy. It's true—don't you find it strange to hear this from me? Do you remember my attitude towards monks? How I pitied them, that they didn't have their own will, that they had to do everything they were told to do, etc. But now I have comprehended that there is no greater happiness than to be under obedience, when you can be assured that you are fulfilling God's will and do not have to answer for your actions.

Grandfather has given me a small cell rule: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,* thirty times; *Most Holy*

Theotokos, save me, ten times; *My holy Guardian Angel, pray to God for me,* ten times; and *All ye Saints, pray to God for me,* ten times. In connection with this he added, "As you say *All ye Saints, pray to God for me,* all the Saints in the heavens will say *Lord, have mercy,* and it will be a gain for you." Now, every time I say, *All ye Saints, pray to God for me,* I imagine how all the Saints—all those in heaven—cry out to the Lord, *Lord, have mercy.*

Pray for Grandfather. He said, "Your prayers console me and help me." I live from visit to visit. What a great mercy of God it is to have the opportunity to visit and talk with him.

Did you receive my letter, in which I am in ecstasies over the writings of St. Hesychius? I searched for it my whole life and it turned out to be lying in our pantry; I found it in a miraculous way only after I asked Grandfather how to open the doors of the heart.

He told Oleg that he has a talent (but he didn't say what kind), and continued, "It's good not to reveal talents, or someone might rob them."

The Elder said, "Life is determined by three ideas—*measure, time* and *weight.* The most beautiful thing, if it is beyond measure, will not make sense. You are close to mathematics; you've been given a sense of measure—remember these three ideas; all of life is determined by them."

"I understand about measure and weight, but what about time? Do you mean an era?"

He smiled silently. "But there is also a greater art—the word. The word raises up and casts down (Psalms of David). However, the way to this art lies through personal podvig, the path of sacrifice. And one out of many thousands attains to it."

* * *

At the second Argeront Congress (in France) of the Christian Student Movement, which took place in about 1926, there was, among many lectures, one by Professor Berdyaev. Bishop Benjamin [Fedchenkov], the inspector of the Theological Institute in Paris, came forward with objections, as an Orthodox bishop, against certain positions of Berdyaev's lecture which contradicted Orthodox teaching. The latter was offended, and right then and there closed up his suitcases and left. The next day Metropolitan Evlogy came to the Congress and gave Bishop Benjamin a strict reprimand. Bishop Benjamin, seeking confirmation, appealed to Fr. Nektary (at that time we were able to communicate with Fr. Nektary by letter). The Elder replied, "In such organizations (as the Christian Student Movement) a philosophy is being developed that is unacceptable to the spirit of Orthodoxy." There later came an even more exact confirmation that he did not approve of precisely that organization (that is, the Movement) at whose gathering Bishop Benjamin had been offended.

During that same time period a certain G. turned to Fr. Nektary for an indication as to whether or not he could enter the Academy (the Theological Institute in Paris), expressing the fear that it was heretical. Fr. Nektary agreed with this last statement, but blessed him to enroll in the Academy and said, "No matter what it is, it will not be a hindrance to a learned man. To know the science that they will teach will not be an obstacle to him."

Then a sorrowful incident occurred at the St. Sergius Metochion. A man with a withered hand came to the kitchen of the Theological Institute and asked to be given some kind of work. Nothing of that sort could be found; right then, he shot himself in the garden.

Bishop Benjamin was very grieved and wrote to Fr. Nektary. It is forbidden by the canons for the Church to commemorate a

suicide. Fr. Nektary advised him to read the Psalter for the reposed in his cell for forty days, and also to find another two readers, to bring the number to three. Here Fr. Nektary added, "The Lord takes away a man's reason, and that which an animal will not do, a man decides to do."

6. CLAIRVOYANCE AND MIRACULOUS HELP
(From the Letters of Nun Nektaria Kontzevitch)

In order not to bring upon a person the sins of disobedience, forgetfulness or negligence, Grandfather did not impose any kind of rules on anyone. But, by his prayers, a person would himself (with the Lord's help, of course) run across books that were appropriate to him at that given moment and would meet people that could help him. What greatness of humility and love towards people! How wondrous is God in His saints!

I noticed that as soon as someone would write a request about something to Grandfather, help would come from him right away. Obviously, by God's mercy, his soul heard all requests that were directed towards him.

The following incident happened with Grandfather: a young woman came to ask a blessing for monasticism, but he said, "No, you'll have a bridegroom; you'll get married and give birth to a son, and he'll weigh ten pounds...." That's exactly what happened, and two years later she brought a lovely, chubby little boy to him for a blessing.

Lida B. was looking for a job for a whole year and couldn't find one. In the summer she did day-work on farms for mere kopecks: she plowed and led the oxen in; in a word, she suffered unbelievably. She wanted to hire herself out as a cook or a laundress, but nowhere was she able to. I advised her to pray for Grandfather's health and, sure enough—in three days she got a job as a village teacher. Her joy was indescribable.

You have asked me to write what Grandfather said last time. When we arrived, Oleg was sick. His temperature was 104 degrees. I said to the Elder, "My Oleg is sick," and he said, smiling, "It's good for a healthy person to be a little sick once in a while." The next day he gave him an apple and said, "Here's some medicine for you." And when he blessed us to leave he said, "When you feed the horses, have Oleg drink some hot water and he'll be well." That's what we did—Oleg drank some hot water, fell asleep, and when he awoke said, "Mama! I'm alright!"

From a letter of April 13, 1924:

A young boy complained to Grandfather that his classmates at school were treating him badly, but Grandfather said, smiling, "Call upon St. George the Trophy-bearer for help and you'll conquer them all—they'll only twitch their legs and run away." That's just what happened. As soon as he made a dash at the bully himself, and called upon St. George the Trophy-bearer for help, the bully's legs began to twitch; he ran away, and from that time on he didn't touch anyone.

He blessed Oleg to try to obtain his wages and he received them, one might say, in a miraculous fashion—not only for that year, but even for the whole previous year, without anyone's support, though they had refused him last year. Oleg was blessed to study well, and up to now he is doing quite satisfactorily in all his subjects leading to his diploma.

He blessed me to give lessons and six students came asking on their own, and all of them were choice pupils—smart, capable, believing children.*

* The mother of two of Mother Nektaria's students instructed her to ask the Elder which institution of higher learning to send her sons to. "She doesn't have to send them anywhere—what you're teaching them is enough for them." It was awkward for Mother Nektaria to convey the Elder's words to her, since the mother of the two children, whom she did not know well, might think that she had said this to keep the students for herself. That was how it turned out: the mother only shrugged her shoulders and sent her

Ah, how sad it is that we live so far away from Grandfather and can rarely come running to him for a blessing.

I don't recall what I wrote to you from my conversations with Grandfather, but what is important to us is that he said that Oleg should finish his studies. He also asked that we pray for him, since he doesn't want to go to Kamchatka.

Grandfather was, as usual, quite cheerful, and joked and laughed quite a bit. At parting he said, "You're always welcome, come again; even though you don't receive any benefit from me—I, on the other hand, am benefitted by you," alluding to the gifts we brought to him.

There is a family with whom we are acquainted. The wife is a believer and a good Christian and woman of prayer, but her husband mocks the fasts and is a weak believer. They were extremely poor and were selling their last possessions. She went to church zealously, but her husband pestered her, saying that she was distributing everything to the priests, and that because of this she would die of hunger. In despair, she was close to suicide and wanted to leave her husband, being in no state to endure his constant reproaches. In grief she turned to Grandfather. Through me he said to her, "Let her have a Moleben served to St. Nicholas—the Lord will help her." That very day she sold some item and had a Moleben served to St. Nicholas. Two days later her husband met a friend who offered him a job. With joy he agreed. But in the USSR, no one who is not a union member can obtain work, and even union members are waiting for jobs by the thousands. He went to see the person upon whom the appointment depended. The man said, "I'm surprised you've even come to see me, since you know the rules and you see the waiting list of thousands, and you're not even a member." He

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children off to school. There they fell in with bad companions, became corrupted, and began to steal clothing and other items from their schoolmates; then they went out on the street to steal and became young criminals.

returned to his friend, who said, "Without the union's consent there's nothing I can do." He went back to the union and said, "I'm perishing; if only once in your life, do a good deed—my life is in your hands." As a result, he got a job—120 rubles a month (sixty dollars) and four and a half rubles a day—about 250 rubles in all. (And old employees of the railroad administration in other offices receive thirty to forty rubles a month). He travelled in his job and would come home once a month, as a welcome guest. You can't comprehend the magnitude of this miracle, not having any idea of how difficult it is to land a job here, and not knowing that this is absolutely impossible for a non-member of the union, and that there are staff reductions every month, when dozens are laid off, even those who have served for ten or fifteen years. His wife attained everything—he's not home, so she can pray and fast unhindered, and her relationship with her husband has settled down. When he left he said, "Pray for me." One can only cry out, *Wondrous is God in His saints!*

After six years, Fr. Nektary's prediction that Oleg would not be drafted into the military came true. With Fr. Nektary's blessing Oleg took up physical education and became an instructor in this field. And, sure enough—he impressed everyone at the draft board with his athletic build and his health. It seemed that the draft was unavoidable. In the evening Oleg had to come to the office to find out what place he was being assigned to, but they ordered him to appear on the next day. This was repeated several times. Oleg and all his relatives were worried, since, not understanding the reasons for the postponements, they feared that this might be a political persecution. They finally stated that Oleg had been freed from military obligations as a gymnastics instructor. It turned out that there were not enough instructors that year and that this was the only draft call in which they were freed.

Grandfather has decided to visit Sarov Hermitage in June and to visit him [Oleg] too, on the way back. This will be in two months. Write in advance about everything you need to know, and I will, without fail, ask about elders, about how the image of an elder can overshadow the image of God, about discernment; about everything.

I asked him about the end of the world. He showed me letters that had been sent to him, concerning visions of the Savior, Who said that the end of the world would be soon; concerning extracts from newspapers, that the Messiah had appeared in India, and Elijah in America, and so on. He spoke much, but also smiled, and earlier, right when he met us, he had addressed us with the following words: "Why are you always turning to my feeblemindedness? Go ask the Optina monks." I smiled, but he said, "I'm speaking to you seriously; they'll tell you everything you need to know." When I visited them, they said, "There are people who occupy themselves with searching for signs of the end of the world, but who don't take care for their own souls; they do all this for the sake of others" (obviously, so as to communicate sensational news). The monks told me that it's not profitable for people to know the time of the second coming: *Watch and pray* said the Savior, which means that you don't have to divine events, since everything will be revealed to the faithful in its own time. Grandfather remained satisfied with the monks' answer, since he also is not an adherent of those who trust every fantasy in that realm. I said, "Batiushka, they say that St. John the Theologian will also come." He replied, "This will all come to pass, but it's a great mystery." And he further stated, "In the days of Noah, for six hundred years the Lord said that there would be a flood, but they did not believe Him and did not repent, and out of a multitude of people there were found only one righteous man and his family." *So also shall the coming of the Son of man be* (Matt. 24:37). And Grandfather also repeated many times, "Hold fast to Orthodoxy."

During my confession Grandfather repeated many times, "O God, be merciful to me!"

We present here some instances of Fr. Nektary's clairvoyance, passed on to us by Professor I.M. Andreyev.

Professors Komarovich and Anichkov, while travelling to see Fr. Nektary (we will return to this visit later), were having an argument about the name-worshippers,* at which point one of the professors, raising an objection against name-worship, brought forth the example of the name of God being pronounced by a parrot or a gramophone record.

When these professors arrived at the Elder's with the desire that the Elder clarify this question, the latter anticipated them, and before they succeeded in asking him about this, proposed that they listen to "a little fairy-tale." The sense of the story was as follows: In one house there lived a parrot in a cage. The maid in this house was very religious and often repeated the prayer, "Lord, have mercy!" The parrot also learned to repeat this prayer. Once, when the maid had gone, having forgotten to close the cage, a cat ran into the room and rushed at the cage. The parrot began running about and cried out with the maid's voice, "Lord, have mercy!" Since the cat was quite afraid of the maid he, after hearing her voice, ran away in fear. Both professors were stunned by this story of Fr. Nektary's.

Once in 1927 Fr. Nektary was giving instructions to one of his spiritual sons to go and see his acquaintance who lived on Aptekarsky Island in Petrograd, at which time he said, "You will meet a bookkeeper for a woodworking factory there, who will get you a job." Arriving at his friend's place, this man actually did meet a bookkeeper for such a factory.

* The "name-worshipper" controversy broke out on Mount Athos around the turn of the century. The so-called name-worshippers were those who believed that God Himself is present when one pronounces His name.—Ed.

They became acquainted and the latter obtained a job for him in his factory.

Professor I. M. Andreyev, during the year 1927, was in correspondence with Fr. Nektary through a monk, Z., who lived in Kozelsk. In directing him, Fr. Nektary foretold to the professor that grievous trials and sufferings awaited him, but that when all was said and done, everything would end up happily and he would emigrate into freedom and would have the opportunity of actively serving the Orthodox Church. In February of 1928 this professor was arrested for his participation in the Catacomb Church, was sent to the Solovki concentration camp and was later exiled to various places. But everything ended up happily, and after the war of 1941-45 the professor emigrated to America.

One must not pass by in silence the relationship of Elder Nektary with Patriarch Tikhon, and the Elder's significance in the life of the Church.

One of Fr. Nektary's regular visitors relates the following about this: "Patriarch Tikhon had never been to see Batiushka Fr. Nektary, and Batiushka had never been to see the Patriarch. It appears that there was not even correspondence between them. However, many questions were resolved by the Patriarch in accordance with the Elder's opinion. This took place through people close to the Patriarch who were in contact with Batiushka. The latter would state his viewpoint on one question or another or would speak allegorically, relating some incident. This conversation would be transmitted to the Patriarch, who always acted according to Batiushka's advice.

"The Patriarch's situation was extraordinarily difficult. The authorities were seeking to dash Christian foundations to pieces. A schism was organized, which took form in so-called 'renovationism'; other groups also sprang into being, based

New Martyr Patriarch Tikhon of Russia in his younger days.

not on purely Christian, but on political considerations. At that very time Optina, which was under the guidance of elders in general, and of the last Elder, Batiushka Nektary, in particular, was proceeding along a firm path, not deviating to either side. Through the authority of the Elder, Optina

spread its influence to all corners of Russia, since people dedicated to the Church flowed there from everywhere, despite the difficulties and dangers. Bishops, priests and lay folk—personally, in writing and verbally (through other people)—turned to the Elder for the solution of spiritual, Church-related, and mundane questions. The Elder's view on this or that question was absolutely authoritative and quickly spread among truly believing people, who were a support to the Patriarch in all his undertakings; but there was also the following incident: the Patriarch, submitting to the influence of the atheist church, published a decree concerning the changeover of church services to the new style. Optina and the clergy under its influence were extremely disconcerted by this decree and refrained from introducing it into church life. This and other circumstances, for example, the opinion of Metropolitan Arsenius, hastened the Patriarch's rescinding of the new style."

An entirely different situation arose with Metropolitan Sergius' coming to power: there was no contact between the latter and Fr. Nektary.

In the summer of 1927, even before the publication of Metropolitan Sergius' declaration, in a conversation with his visitors, Professors Komarovich and Anichkov, Elder Nektary had called Metropolitan Sergius a renovationist. To their objection that the latter had repented, the Elder replied, "Yes, he repented, but the poison is still in him."

From the moment of the publication of this declaration, which betrayed the Church into the hands of its enemies, the best bishops and most steadfast believers began to leave Metropolitan Sergius.

The process was protracted—some delayed in leaving him, hoping that thanks to the accusations, Metropolitan Sergius would be brought to reason. But finally, the process

ended in 1929, when Metropolitan Cyril became head of the Catacomb Church, commemorating the name of Metropolitan Peter.*

The Elder did not survive until this event. For the last year of his life (1927-28) Fr. Nektary was very weak and received almost no one. His strength was noticeably waning. In December of 1927 it was thought that the Elder was dying; however, there was a temporary improvement.

But at the end of April of 1928 it became clear that the end was approaching.

When Fr. Nektary was asked whom to summon for the last rites he indicated Fr. Sergius Mechev, who before this had signed a protest against the declaration of Metropolitan Sergius.** Fr. Sergius arrived, confessed and communed Fr. Nektary, and immediately left. On that very day, April 29, late in the evening, Fr. Nektary quietly departed to the Lord. He was buried on the fourth day, May 2, since groups of believers were continually arriving from various cities.

On the day of the funeral an exceptional gathering of people from places both near and far could be observed. The funeral lasted from five in the morning until five in the evening. It seemed as if some kind of great celebration was taking place. There were many clergy. Fr. Sergius Mechev presided.

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* See Professor I. M. Andreyev, *A Short Overview of the History of the Church From the Revolution up to Our Days,* Jordanville, 1951, p. 51 (in Russian).

It is to this time that Fr. Nektary's prediction about the closure of all the churches, made in the summer of 1923, pertains. We present it in full, from the notes of Mother Nektaria: "3/19/24. Last summer (1923), Grandfather said that the churches would be opened temporarily, but that after five years all the churches would be closed. The first part has come true for us, and we are taking delight in wonderful church singing."

** Ibid.

7. DIVINE NECTAR

The first Elder in Optina was Hieroschema-monk Leonid (Leo in schema), who was strong and powerful to act—he royally opened the line of great elders. In the flowering of Russia's vital powers Ambrose nourished all with divine spiritual food—ambrosia. The last Elder, Nektary, the favorite disciple of Fr. Ambrose, in the unbearable heat of the terrible trials experienced by his homeland, assuaged its thirst and fortified believers with spiritual consolation, with divine sustenance—nectar.

"In the Bible a title and name always has a hidden and important meaning," said Elder Barsanuphius of Optina, "but often even in life the name of a place, a person's surname—in short, any name—has a certain secret meaning, the elucidation of which is sometimes not without benefit."

PART II

The Letters of Elder Nektary

The signature of Elder Nektary, from a little icon given by him as a blessing to the author, I. M. Kontzevitch, who cherished it for his whole life, and whose widow bequeathed it to the St. Herman Brotherhood, which treasures it in the monastery catholicon.

Cover of a contemporary Russian biography of Elder Nektary.

The Letters of Elder Nektary

1.

Most worthy in the Lord, Nina Konstantinovna!

I received your letter of December 29. May the Lord help you to find what is useful and soul-profiting in life. You have acted well in being obedient to your mother and yielding to her preference concerning Anna Alexandrovna's son's proposal. Happiness in married life is given only to one who fulfills God's commandments and who regards marriage as a Sacrament of the Christian Church.

I beg your indulgence for my late reply. I call down upon you peace and God's blessing.

Sinful hieromonk Nektary
1918

2.

God-loving slave of God, Olga Michailovna!

If you are intending to come to Optina, God bless you—come.

You want to learn love for God? Begin! I place before your attention the teachings of the Fathers about this: "Do you want to learn love for God? Withdraw from every deed, word, thought and sensation forbidden by the Gospels. By your enmity towards sin, which is so hateful to the All-Holy

God, show and prove your love for God. The sins into which you happen to fall due to weakness, treat immediately with repentance. But it is better to make an effort not to allow even these sins access to you, by strict watchfulness over yourself.

"Do you want to learn love for God? Painstakingly study the Lord's commandments in the Gospels and try to fulfill them in very deed, and try to turn the Gospel virtues into your own skills and qualities. It is characteristic of a loving person to fulfill the will of his beloved."

And so, I wish you God's mercy and every happiness, and I call down upon you peace and God's blessing.

Sinful hieromonk Nektary
December 15, 1921
Skete of Optina Monastery

3.

Most Honorable in the Lord, Olga Michailovna!

I received your letter. I greet you with the New Year and prayerfully wish that you will spend this year and the future years of your life in pleasing God, in thoughts of eternity, and in deeds for the sake of eternity.

Drive away the enemy, and the temptations and evil thoughts he brings, by the prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This prayer can be performed during any occupation. May the Lord preserve you from all the snares of the enemy.

I call down upon you peace and God's blessing.

Sinful hieromonk Nektary
January 18, 1922

4.

Much-esteemed in the Lord, Sophia Alexandrovna!

Your sorrows are known to me, and sorrow is always sent so that, through prayer, a person will draw God's mercy, which exceeds sorrow many times over. I am not the only one who thinks that your husband's affliction will become lighter. Pray to St. Anastasia and the Apostle Peter. And tell your daughter that the health of her soul and body depend on frequent and worthy reception of Christ's Holy Mysteries. It is time that she made use of her life, given her as a gift, for the glory of God; for only in this is our eternal blessedness; only in communion with the Lord, in obedience to His Word, in reading it. Only faith and righteousness (or the hourly striving towards them), taken together, and not separately; only submissiveness and gratitude towards God for all that is sent us will deliver us from every kind of sickness, sorrow and attack, replacing all these remedies with peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, which I wish for you from the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sinful hieromonk Nektary
September 7, 1922

5.

Most God-loving Sophia Alexandrovna!

Peace and God's blessing be with you and your spouse (you didn't write down his name) and your daughter Irina.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven (Matt. 5:11-12). May this word of God be a consolation for you and a sure hope. Stand firmly in your faith in God and hope in Him, and the Lord will not put you to shame. And

whatever the Lord does, rely in all things on God's will, which is good and perfect. Thus did the holy martyrs endure and thus did they have hope, and the Lord did not put them to shame. He glorified them and was Himself glorified in them. The same words [of the Savior] are in store for you, if you follow in their steps. And what is most precious of all is the unspeakable joy of eternal salvation that you will receive through the grace of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

So many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death, (Rom. 6:3) says the holy Apostle Paul.

That you should have no contact with red priests* is correct. As far as how to act in case of some kind of need, ask direction from His Eminence Bishop Theophan [the Recluse] himself.

Sinful hieromonk Nektary
January 23, 1923

6.

God-loving Olga Michailovna!

May the peace and blessing of God be with you.

So as not to lose the grace of God, try harder to acquire the remembrance of God. You must abide by the Word of God, or the commandments, as the Lord Himself said, *He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me* (John 14:21). It is in this way that one attains to sincere service to God with all one's heart.

You ask how you should relate to unbelievers? Answer with discretion. But to awaken people and lead them to God—this is not your business. The Word of God has been preached and is being preached to all. In talks with unbelieving coworkers, treat

* That is, with "renovationists" or members of the "Living Church."

them as you would believers, but don't get into religious arguments with them—it's useless.

Save yourself, and may the Heavenly Queen help you!

Sinful hieromonk Nektary
February 4, 1923

7.

Most Honorable Olga Michailovna!

May the mercy of God be with you! I have received your letter. You ask by what path to go towards God. Go by the path of humility; by humbly bearing the difficult circumstances of life, by humbly enduring the sicknesses that are sent by the Lord, by humbly hoping that you will not be abandoned by the Lord, by the Quick Helper and by the loving Heavenly Father; by humble prayer for help from on high, for the driving away of despondency and feelings of hopelessness by which the enemy of salvation endeavors to bring us to despair, which is ruinous for a man and deprives him of Divine grace and which withdraws God's mercy from him.

The meaning of Christian life, according to the word of the holy Apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, is to *glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's* (I Cor. 6:20). And so, inscribing these holy words in our souls and hearts, we ought to take care that our dispositions and deeds in life serve for the glory of God and the edification of our neighbors.

Using prayer to the saints as God's weapon, ask for their intercession before Him for the easing of bodily infirmity; turn to those holy saints towards whom your heart is particularly disposed.

May the Lord preserve you! I call down upon you peace and God's blessing.

Sinful hieromonk Nektary
March 5, 1925

8.

God-loving slave of God Maria!

May the mercy of God be with you!

I received your letter and the money with it, for which I offer you my thanks. The Lord save you for your concern for me. I thank you also for your Paschal greeting, and I greet you with the present days of Holy Pentecost. I will pray for you and your husband according to my strength. May the Lord preserve you in peace and love and may He deliver you from every temptation.

I call down upon you and your spouse peace and God's blessing.

Sinful hieromonk Nektary
April 23, 1923

9.

In Truth Christ is Risen!

Honorable Maria Michailovna!

The mercy of God be with you!

I received all your letters and the money, for which I offer you my thanks. I thank you also for greeting me with the Bright Feast of Christ's Resurrection, and I greet you in turn with Holy Pentecost, wishing for you a well-ordered life, both spiritually and physically.

It is gratifying to hear that you remain in good health and happiness, and that for the present you are still living fairly well with your husband. May the Lord grant that nothing will disturb your peaceful life together. Pray for this every day. Fight against suspicious thoughts with regard to your husband. Such thoughts, often unfounded, only destroy peace of soul and muddle the head. Struggle also with the other weaknesses

which you mentioned in your letter. Prayer is given to us as a help in this struggle. Drive away all trouble also by prayer. As to how to learn prayer—read about this in the works of Bishop Ignatius [Brianchaninov]. In his works everything is explained well and simply. Thus you will see what kind of prayer most corresponds to your situation and frame of mind.

In one of your letters, among other things you asked what you should do if your husband demands marital relations on inappropriate days. One must look upon such demands as upon the breaking of the established rule concerning abstinence in married life. If, after reminding your husband about such a rule he does not abandon his demand—then, choosing the lesser evil, you must submit so as to avert the greater evil; so that your husband will not turn to others and fall into adultery. You, of course, on your part, must tell this to your spiritual father at Confession—that against your will you had to violate feast days and other days in your conjugal life.

I call upon you God's blessing.

Sinful hieromonk Nektary
May 12, 1926

10.

Honorable Maria Michailovna!

The mercy of God be with you!

I received your letters and the little package, for which I offer you my thanks. The Lord save you for everything! You may come to us with your husband and sister. God bless you. Let M[atushka] Darya live with us for the time being, as long as there will be no misunderstanding with her husband. You must fulfill your vow concerning the trip to Sarov Monastery. You may help your sister Anna Michailovna get settled in Petrograd—perhaps God will grant that a place be found. You ought

not to move your sister to your apartment. Let her settle in a separate apartment.

Send God's blessing to the maiden Natalia; and my advice to her is to study in the technical school. I greet you and Alexander Petrovich with the New Year and wish God's mercy for you. May there be peace and harmony between you. I call down upon you and your spouse God's blessing.

Sinful hieromonk Nektary
January 15, 1927

11.

In Truth Christ is Risen!

Honorable Alexander Petrovich and Maria Michailovna!

I thank you for greeting me with the Bright Feast and for the Paschal gift. The Lord save you! I greet you with the present Feast of Pentecost and wish you God's mercy. All of your letters were received by me. The resolution of the questions posed in them we will postpone until a personal meeting, if the Lord will bless it. Give God's blessing to your mother, slave of God Anna, and my thanks for the money she sent. In answer to her question, tell her: God bless her to live where she's getting along well. Pass along to the maidens Natalia and Tatiana (Morozova) God's blessing and my thanks for greeting me with the Feast of Christ's Resurrection. To the first question—where and on which cliros to sing—get an answer from Fr. Nikon. As regards her trip to us—decide this yourselves. God bless maiden Tatiana to come and see you now and then for soul-profiting talks if this will not be burdensome for you. I call down upon you peace and God's blessing.

Sinful hieromonk Nektary
April 26, 1927

12.

Honorable Maria Michailovna!

I received your letter. Among other things you write that the thought has come to you to leave your husband. What is there to say to this? You and your husband were given a good life but you chose a worse one, and are now suffering from your own will. I have not given, nor can I give, my blessing for your invitation to your sister Claudia to live with you; you must live apart absolutely. You have to fight against unkind thoughts, not accepting them, but driving them away with the Jesus Prayer.

I received the package. I thank you and Alexander Petrovich for your love and care towards me. The Lord save you! I call down upon you peace and God's blessing.

Save yourselves and live peacefully!

Sinful hieromonk Nektary

13.

To Nina Vladimirovna

Thank you for your greeting and for your good intentions. I bless you to take care of your health and not to disregard the rebuke that during the cold season of the year (and where you are this is during the summer) it is essential for you to dress warmly, even though it's awkward. And here at the beginning of the new year I'm presenting you with a lesson in life, so that you will not disregard yourself and will lead your life with discernment and good measure; this will be to your benefit, and you yourself will be at peace. I send you my blessing to get a certificate from the doctor and to be a little sick for a week in a good spirit. If you wish, come during your school vacation as well as now to us in

Kholmishche; besides this I send you the very best sincere and heartfelt wishes.

H[ieromonk] Nektary

14.

Beloved in the Lord!

I thank you for greeting me with the Feasts. Perhaps (it's even likely) it's for the better that I did not manage to answer you earlier. To come here by the 14th was possible, but it would have been difficult even for a healthy person, let alone for someone weakened by illness. Perhaps it's better to hold off a little longer and finish preparing for Holy Communion at home. According to the opinion of doctors, typhus revitalizes the organism; you and I know that any illness acts beneficially upon the soul. So you must fortify with zeal that closeness to the Lord which is felt by the soul more distinctly thanks to the weakening of the flesh. I have prayed for all of you. Don't be confused by the overwhelming multitude of temptations of our times. Forgetfulness of God's omnipresence in and of itself carries a sentence. There is but one means to avert this inevitable extremity, and that is repentance. The Lord is showing us the ascent of His patience in the lives of many. Blessed are those who do not let this eleventh hour slip by forever, and who lead their reason to the obedience of faith. I implore God's mercies for you from our Lady, and the Lord's blessing for all of you.

(no signature or date)

PART III

A Biographical Sketch of Elder Nektary

Gathered from
Those Who Knew Him

"I have lit the lamp, but take care of the wick yourselves."

—Elder Nektary

Elder Nektary during his early years in Optina.

Foreword

BY OPTINA MONASTERY*

Hieroschema-monk Nektary (1853-1928) was the last Optina Elder chosen by the brotherhood in common. He bore the cross of the service of eldership during the years of severe trials for the Russian Orthodox Church, for the country and for the people. Endowed by God with the great gift of prophecy and clairvoyance, he saw, long before the revolution and civil war, the approaching misfortunes and afflictions of the people, the martyric deaths of his close spiritual children, and the devastation of Russia. Elder Nektary prayed for the whole country, consoled the people and strengthened them in faith. During those years of grievous trials he took upon himself the burden of people's sins, their sorrows and hardships. Fr. Nektary shared the fate of many of his compatriots: he was persecuted, exiled and died in banishment.

Thus there is far less known about the last Optina Elder, who completed his struggle in our era, than about his glorious predecessors. At a time of persecution of the Church, of persecution of monasticism and the priesthood, correspondence with the Elder was difficult, and we succeeded in finding only a few letters. He did not keep journals or notes, and in the memoirs of his spiritual children there have been preserved only some of his individual sayings and teachings, consisting at times

* *The Life of Optina Elder Nektary.* Kozelsk: Optina Monastery, 1996.

of only a few phrases or words. No portrait of the Elder was ever painted; there are only a few pencil sketches and drawings, in which his image is barely outlined.

In the life of Hieroschema-monk Nektary there were likewise almost no outward events from which to form a long narrative concerning him. Elder Nektary spent fifty years in the Skete of Optina Monastery, of which more than twenty were in reclusion. He ascended the spiritual ladder from reclusion to common service, but the spiritual path of the Elder will remain hidden from us forever. When Elder Nektary was asked about this he answered with humility, "I sat in my cell and repented, and then for thirty more years I prayed off my sins."

The life of Elder Nektary is compiled from the few documented testimonies known to us—from his personal sayings, instructions and teachings; from the memoirs of the Elder's spiritual children; and from the writings of people who had the good fortune to meet him once, but for whom that encounter remained forever in their memory, enriching them spiritually, and changing their lives. Perhaps in time, lost documents, testimonies, memoirs and letters will be recovered, which will fill out the Life of Fr. Nektary, the holy Elder of Optina.

O Lord, help!

Optina, 1996

I

The Young Monk

(1853-1912)

1. CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

Optina elder nektary was born in 1853 in the city of Elets in the Orel province in the family of Basil and Elena Tikhonov, people of deep faith and piety. His father was a mill-worker and his mother was a hired worker.

The child was baptized in the Elets church, dedicated to St. Sergius of Radonezh, and given the name Nicholas. His godparents were named Nicholas and Matrona. He always prayed for them and for his parents.When the child was seven years old his father departed to the Lord. Before his repose he blessed his son with an icon of St. Nicholas, entrusting his child to the Saint's guardianship. The Elder did not part with this icon for his entire life. Besides Nicholas, his mother was left with several younger children who died prematurely from hunger and illnesses.

Elder Nektary often began stories about his childhood with the words: "This was in my childhood, when I lived at home, together with my mother. In the whole wide world there were only the two of us, Mama and me, and there was also a cat that lived with us.... We were of a low estate and because of this we were poor; who needs people like that?"

Nicholas had the warmest, sincerest relationship with his mother. Her prayers, as well as a strict upbringing, protected him from many misfortunes and temptations. The youth grew up to be meek, quiet, and God-loving; he was intelligent and inquisitive. But due to extreme poverty he was forced to study, not in a municipal school, but in the village parish school. There he learned reading, writing and mathematics, and studied the Law of God.

When Nicholas was in his eleventh year his mother was forced to send him to work in the shop of a rich merchant, Khamov. She soon reposed. Nicholas lived for nine years in the merchant's house. In his time free from work he read spiritual books and went to church. He was distinguished in his youth by meekness, modesty and purity of soul. He was a lover of labor and rose to the rank of junior clerk. God inclined the hearts of people towards him. Goodness, an inquisitive mind, shyness and sincerity—these were the qualities by which he stood out from amongst the rest in the shop of the merchant Khamov.

When Nicholas had reached the age of twenty, the senior clerk thought to wed him to his daughter. The girl was very nice and Nicholas liked her. Even ten years later, remembering his bride-to-be, the Elder would smile; and to one nun whom he used to receive very kindly, he said, "You remind me of my bride of long ago."

At that time in Elets there lived the almost 100-year-old schema-nun, Eldress Theoktista, a spiritual daughter of St. Tikhon of Zadonsk. The townspeople had the pious custom of taking counsel with her on all important undertakings. Nicholas' employer sent him to her for a blessing for the marriage. The Eldress told him: "Young man—go to Optina, to Hilarion; he'll tell you what to do." She made the sign of the Cross over him and gave him some tea for the road. He kissed her hand and went to his employer. "Thus and thus," he said, "Matushka

Theoktista is sending me to Optina." The merchant said nothing and even gave him money for the journey. Nicholas said goodbye to his bride and left; they never saw one another again. He placed a Gospel, the icon of St. Nicholas, the tea, and bread and salt into his knapsack and set out on his way, in accordance with God's blessing.

2. ENTRANCE INTO OPTINA MONASTERY AND EARLY LIFE IN THE SKETE

It was spring when he arrived in Optina. In springtime, everywhere around Optina is indescribably beautiful. Amidst the meadows flows the silvery Zhizdra River, above which are willows and oaks and beyond which, on the other bank, are the monastery orchards and the enormous Optina pine forest. The Monastery is girded about by white walls with towers at its corners, and each tower is crowned by a weather vane in the form of an angel blowing a trumpet. The sight alone of the Monastery calms and grants peace to the soul and tears one away from the vanity of worldly life. An even greater impression is made by the Skete, to which one must walk along a forest path in the midst of centuries-old pines. Many years later Elder Nektary thus recalled his first impressions of Optina: "Lord, what beauty there is here! The sun is here from the first rays of dawn, and what flowers!—It's just like Paradise."

But he did not know how to find Elder Hilarion, nor did he even know who this Hilarion was. He asked one of the skete monks, who smiled at his ignorance and replied, "All right, I'll show you Hilarion, only I don't really know if he's the one you need." He led the young man to the skete Superior, Hieroschema-monk Hilarion. Nicholas told him about Eldress Theoktista and asked him to decide his fate. But even

Fr. Hilarion said, "I myself can't tell you anything; but go to Fr. Ambrose, and whatever he says, do it."

Once, Fr. Nektary, when he was already an elder, saw that a pilgrim had the book, *The Life of Elder Hilarion,* and he remarked, "I'm indebted to him for everything. He received me into the Skete fifty years ago when I came, having no place to lay my head. I was a total orphan, in utter poverty, and the brothers then were well-educated. And here I was, the very lowest there ever was." And he held his hand about a yard from the floor to make a graphic demonstration of his situation. "But Elder Hilarion had already passed through and knew the earthly path and the heavenly path. The earthly path—this is simple; but the heavenly path...." And the Elder said no more.

In the Skete Nicholas awaited his meeting with Elder Ambrose, who was then at the apex of his glory. At that time so many people were coming to Elder Ambrose that they would have to wait weeks to be received; but the Elder received Nicholas right away and spoke with him for two hours. Fr. Nektary never revealed to anyone what their conversation was about, but afterwards he remained in the Skete and never went home again.

In one of the notebooks of Optina an entry was made on this day: "In 1873, on April 27, the novice Nicholas Vasilievich Tikhonov, from the lower middle-class of the city of Elets in the Orel province, entered the Skete in the twentieth year of his life."*

Thus did Nicholas Tikhonov's life change suddenly. By God's Providence he had found his true mission. For it is in the Lord, and *not in man that walketh to direct his steps (Jer. 10:23).*

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* This notebook was kept with the blessing of St. Ambrose. On the first page, in his hand, the following inscription was made: "Brother Constantine is blessed to record the noteworthy events in Optina Monastery and the Forerunner Skete. September 20, 1862. Greatly sinful hieromonk Ambrose."

Elder Hilarion of Optina.

He now found himself under the guidance of the two great Optina Elders—Ambrose as his Elder, to whom he turned for special needs, and Anatole (Zertsalov), as his confessor. Both Fr. Ambrose and Fr. Anatole were strict in leading him along the true monastic path.

Once the Elder was asked, "Batiushka, how did you behave towards the Elders? Did you venture to be rebellious towards them, as I am towards you?"

"No. Such a thought could never enter into my head. Only once, I was guilty of something and was sent to Elder Ambrose for him to teach me a lesson. He had a stick. If you committed an offense he would beat you (not like I beat you!). But I, of course, didn't want to be beaten. As soon as I saw the Elder reaching for the stick I ran away, but later asked forgiveness."

The great Elders themselves gave him treats, but at the same time they humbled him. He once came to Elder Ambrose and asked for sweets to have with tea, but the latter said to him sternly, "What? You've eaten them all already? Ah, you Lip-smacker!"

Nun Nektaria relates, "When Fr. Nektary had the obedience of altar-attendant, his cell opened into the church. He lived in that cell for twenty-five years, not conversing with any of the monks—he only ran to the Elder or to his confessor and back. He did his work perfectly, no matter what obedience he bore, and everything he had was always in good condition. At night a light could constantly be seen in his cell—he was either reading or praying. But during the day he was often caught sleeping, and they formed the opinion about him that he was a sleepyhead and a sluggard. He did this, of course, out of humility."

This obedience required him to be the first one to come to church in the morning, before the brothers, to prepare the altar for services. Matins in the Skete began at about one in the morning and continued until half past three. It was not easy for

a youth from the world to accustom himself to the strict rule in the holy Monastery. Having stood through the night in prayer, he would come to church half asleep. The brothers complained about the young man to Elder Ambrose; and he, jokingly as always, said prophetically, "Just you wait—little Kolya will cease his slumber, and come in handy for our number."* Thus did St. Ambrose foretell his future service as an elder.

The higher Fr. Nektary ascended the spiritual ladder, the lower he considered himself, in accordance with his humility; the more he realized his unworthiness.

He never spoke about his spiritual podvigs; he only said once: "I sat in my cell and repented. And there is nothing in the world more boring than repentance. But it's necessary,"—and he laughed.

When he was already a monk, Fr. Nektary once came to Elder Ambrose who asked him, "How's life? How goes the building of your spiritual edifice?"

"There's nothing but grief," he replied. "You lay a brick, and you pull out two; you cement a stone in place and three fall out. What kind of building is this? It's just junk—it's fit to weep over."

Then the Elder told Fr. Nektary about a woman of the aristocracy—that once when she was sick, her servants dumped all the trash in a pile in the middle of the courtyard. When the lady recovered she ordered that the whole pile be sorted out, and it turned out that almost nothing needed to be thrown out; everything was of some use for the housekeeping.

"You see, little brother," the Elder consoled him, "there's no need for you to despair about your junk. You take a look at yourself, and it's junk on top of junk; but you'll begin to sort yourself out, and you, too, will pick out something useful."

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* Elder Ambrose often used rhyming couplets when making comments about his spiritual children.—Ed.

Following his great preceptor in everything, Fr. Nektary himself at times consoled his spiritual children: "From the ugliest thing can come something beautiful. You know the kind of mud that's on the ground; it seems to soil your feet terribly, but if you search you might see diamonds."

Nicholas fulfilled any obedience with great humility and much zeal. And later, when he himself had become an elder, he always pointed to the great significance of obedience, calling it the highest and primary virtue, man's most important acquisition.

Elder Nektary always placed a very high value on guidance by elders. Both in his youth and when he was already an elder himself he always kept the apostolic commandment: *Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch over your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you* (Heb. 13:17). And, instructing his spiritual children, he would say that an elder and his activity are not subject to the judgment of his disciples. His directions must be received without any arguments. Therefore even defending the elder is forbidden, since this already in some sense constitutes a deliberation or judgment. Due to his lack of experience, Fr. Nektary defended his Elder, Fr. Ambrose, in arguments, from the verbal attacks of certain injudicious and impertinent brothers. The Elder recalled, "Unfortunately, among the brethren were some who grumbled against the Elder. Sometimes I had to listen to the audacious and senseless talk of such ones, although I always tried to defend the Elder. I remember that after one such conversation there appeared to me in a dream my spiritual father, Hieroschema-monk Anatole, who said to me threateningly, 'No one has the right to discuss the actions of the Elder, being guided by his own foolishness and impertinence; an elder will give an account for his actions to God; we cannot comprehend

their meaning.'" He always remembered these words of his spiritual father, which elucidated for him, while still a novice, the lofty significance of the service of eldership. And years later he warned his own spiritual children that if their relationship with the Elder did not develop, they had to seek the reason for this within themselves. "Some complain about the Elder, that he doesn't involve himself in their problems and doesn't receive them, but they don't turn to themselves and think, 'Aren't we sinners? Maybe that's the reason the Elder doesn't receive me; he's waiting for my repentance and is testing me.' I'll tell you something of myself, a sinner. It would happen that I would go to Elder Ambrose and he would say to me, 'What are you walking around with nothing to do for? You'd better sit in your cell and pray!' I would be hurt but wouldn't complain and instead would go to my spiritual father, Elder Anatole. But he would greet me sternly: 'Why are you roaming around with nothing to do? Did you come to yak?' And so I would drag myself back to my cell. There I had a full-length icon of the Savior; I would fall down before it and cry out all night, 'O Lord! What a great sinner I am if even the Elders won't receive me!'"

3. TONSURE

Under the guidance of the great instructors the youth grew spiritually. On April 3, 1876, Nicholas was tonsured a riassaphore-monk. After passing through the test of obedience for more than ten years, on March 14, 1887, on the fourth Sunday of Great Lent, he was tonsured into the mantia. At his monastic tonsure he was given the name Nektary in honor of St. Nektary of the Kiev Caves Lavra (whose memory is celebrated on November 29). Receiving the angelic rank brought him great joy. In his old age he would recall, "For a whole year afterwards I felt just like I had wings at my shoulders." Concerning

the tonsure he said to one nun, "When you entered the convent you gave a vow to the Lord and the Lord accepted everything and recorded all your promises. And thus you received monasticism. But this is only the monastic ceremony. When you live in a monastic way you will receive everything in the future life; but if you receive a mantia and do not live in a monastic way, it will be taken from you in the future life."

Mother A., hearing this instruction, said to Fr. Nektary, "I lead a very poor life." He replied to her, "When people are learning something, they always spoil things at first; but later they begin to do it well. You're grieved that nothing comes out right with you. Well, Matushka, when the Lord will vouchsafe you the angelic habit, grace will fortify you in everything." Mother A. objected, "Batiushka, but you just said that one needn't strive for the mantia." "Matushka, such is spiritual law; there is no need to ask or to refuse."

Having received the mantia, he almost never left his cell, let alone the confines of the Skete. There were even years when the windows of his cell were covered over by blue drapes. He himself liked to repeat, "For a monk there are only two exits from his cell—to church or to the grave."

With the blessing of the Elders, Fr. Nektary read spiritual books in his reclusion. In those years Optina had a large library, containing a total of more than thirty thousand books. This was a collection, not only of the best spiritual books published in Russia, but even of secular literature. Here also were the books printed by the Monastery—the translations of patristic ascetical works, and the letters of the great Optina Elders. He became acquainted with the works of the Holy Fathers—Abba Dorotheos, Saints John Climacus, Isaac the Syrian, Symeon the New Theologian, Macarius the Great, and the holy hierarchs St. Tikhon of Zadonsk and St. Dimitry of Rostov. He especially loved these last two and often quoted them.

4. ORDINATION

Fr. Nektary was ordained a hierodeacon on January 19, 1894 by Bishop Anatole, and was ordained a hieromonk on October 21, 1898, by His Eminence Macarius of Kaluga.

Concerning his ordination he related: "When I was ordained to the priesthood by our former hierarch, the most honorable Bishop Macarius, he, with his archpastoral eye, saw through to my unsettled spiritual state and, after my ordination, gave me a brief but powerful sermon; and so powerful was that sermon that I remember it up to now—and how many years have gone by—and I will not forget it to the end of my days. And did he say much to me? He called me into the altar and said, 'Nektary! When you are grieving and despondent and beset by heavy temptations, keep repeating this one thing: "O Lord, protect, save and have mercy on Thy slave, Hieromonk Nektary."' This was all the Bishop said, but his words saved me more than once; and they save me to this day, for they were said with authority."

He did not reveal from what misfortunes this sermon saved him, but he did tell of one temptation. Once an order came to Optina from the Holy Synod to dispatch a hieromonk to the navy for a round-the-world cruise. The Archimandrite proposed this assignment to Fr. Nektary. The young hieromonk with joy began to prepare himself, forgetting at first that in Optina nothing was done without the blessing of an elder. Only after some time, returning to his usual prayerful state, did he come to his senses and go to Elder Joseph to receive a blessing. But the Elder, and through him the Lord Himself, did not give him a blessing for this journey. Hieromonk Nektary immediately humbled himself and remained in Optina.

Another trial came upon him when he was already an elder. He was almost seventy years old, and he wanted to resign his position as elder and become a pilgrim. "But here I

myself already realized that this was a temptation, fought with myself and stayed."

Having spent more than twenty years in solitude and silence, Fr. Nektary relaxed his reclusion. From time to time he began to appear among people; out of his great humility he concealed his grace-filled gifts with foolishness. He had the blessings of the Elders for this. The Optina Elders often covered their spiritual greatness by semi-foolish behavior—by jokes, eccentricity and unexpected harshness, or by a strange simplicity with regard to prominent and arrogant visitors. At times, humbling the monks and novices, uprooting their pride and self-love, they would even swear at them.

In taking on this new podvig, Fr. Nektary confused the weak among the brethren and pilgrims at the Skete by his behavior. He wore bright kerchiefs and colorful women's jackets over his *podrasnik;* he dumped all the food he was given in trapeza into one dish—the sour, the sweet and the salty. With a tall white cap on his head and dressed in a yellow cape over a red liner he would appear at trapeza, with a felt boot on one foot and a light-blue slipper on the other.

The riassaphore-monk Nicholas (Belyaev)* wrote in his journal of how, on the day that he was clothed in the riassa, Fr. Nektary came up to him and said, "I wish that you would proceed along this path with humility, patience and thanksgiving,"—and then he ran away. "I like Fr. Nektary," wrote the young monk, "only he's really weird."

Only in the middle of the 1920s did the Elder cease his foolishness, and when his spiritual son George Chulkov asked a blessing to follow this path, he replied, "Earlier we used this method, but now we must do good with discernment."

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* Subsequently Optina Elder Nikon.

Staircase leading up to the entrance of the main Monastery and its bell tower, much as it must have looked when the young future Elder Nektary arrived in Optina.

The porch and inside entrance to Elder Nektary's "hut" in Optina Skete as it looks today.

2

Eldership

(1912–1923)

1. HIS DESIGNATION AS ELDER

Beginning in 1905, Elder Joseph, Fr. Ambrose's successor, often became ill and noticeably weakened. In May of 1906, after a serious illness, he resigned his position as skete Superior, and the Holy Synod assigned Fr. Barsanuphius to this post which, according to the custom of Optina, was bound up with eldership. Fr. Barsanuphius, a strong-willed, brilliant personality, was likewise manifest as a bearer of the special grace of God.

Six years later Elder Barsanuphius, as a result of intrigues and slanders, was transferred from Optina to be the Superior of the Golutvin Monastery, which was in a state of complete decline. A year later, Schema-archimandrite Barsanuphius reposed (†1913).

With Fr. Barsanuphius' departure from Optina, Fr. Nektary could not avoid becoming an elder and, willing or not, he had to accept it.

In 1912, at the insistence of Archimandrite Benedict, the Superior of the Borovsky Monastery and head of the monasteries in the Kaluga diocese, the Optina monks gathered to choose an elder. At first they offered the eldership to Archimandrite Agapit (†February 23, 1922), then living in Optina

in retirement. This was a man of lofty spirit and broad education, the author of the prima vita of Elder Ambrose. He had resolutely declined the office of bishop, which had been offered to him more than once, and he refused eldership as well. In his old age he took on foolishness, and then became ill. He struggled, having only a few close disciples, among whom was Fr. Nektary.*

After the repose of Elder Anatole (Zertsalov), Fr. Nektary's confessor was Elder Joseph, after whose death he passed under the eldership of Archimandrite Agapit, to whom he went for Confession, remaining in complete obedience to him until the latter's repose.

After Fr. Agapit's refusal to accept eldership, they began to ask him to indicate a worthy man to occupy the position of elder, and he named Fr. Nektary. The latter in his humility was not even present at the meeting of the brethren. When he had been chosen, they sent Fr. Averky for him. He came to him and said, "Batiushka, they're requesting you at the meeting." But Fr. Nektary declined, saying, "They can choose whomever is needed without me."

"The Archimandrite sent me to get you and asks that you come." Fr. Nektary put on his riassa and just as he was—one

* Concerning Elder Agapit, there is a story handed down by Dunechka, the nurse who looked after him in the infirmary. Once she quietly took his prayer rope from the crossbar of the bed, where it always hung, and took it with her to church. "Oh boy," she thought, "I'll go pray with his prayer rope!" It seemed as though Elder Agapit didn't notice that she took it. Dunechka stood in church and tried to pray with his prayer rope, but she was overcome by sleep. She had never in her life been so sleepy—she was falling asleep on her feet. Then she realized that something was wrong, repented, and brought the prayer rope back. She wanted to hang it back up unnoticed. But Elder Agapit opened his eyes, looked at her and laughed: "Open my box." Dunya opened it. "There, take a prayer rope. That one's light, but mine is too heavy for you."

foot in a slipper, the other in a felt boot—he went to the meeting. By that time the Lord had revealed to him not only the fact that he would be chosen as elder, but all the approaching terrible events that were soon to follow: the revolution, the closing of Optina, his arrest and his death in a strange place.

When they explained to him that he had been chosen as elder of the Monastery, Fr. Nektary replied, "No, fathers and brothers! I'm feeble-minded and can't carry such a burden." But Archimandrite Benedict said, "Fr. Nektary, accept the obedience." And Fr. Nektary agreed unquestioningly.

It is said that when Fr. Nektary was chosen as Elder, he declined for three days, weeping. When he was already in exile on the farm of Basil Petrovich, he once told Nadezhda Alexandrovna Pavlovich:* "When they chose me, I had already foreseen the dispersal of Optina, prison and exile, and I didn't want to take this upon myself."

When Fr. Nektary was already an elder and had settled into Elder Ambrose's cell, Fr. Benedict decided to test him. Arriving at the Monastery, he sent someone to tell him that his presence was requested. But Fr. Nektary did not go. "For years I've been living in the Skete without leaving to go anywhere, and I'm not fit to go," he said. Then Fr. Benedict sent for him a second time and bid them to say, "The diocesan head of

* Nadezhda Alexandrovna Pavlovich (1895-1980) was born in Latvia. She worked in the presidium of the All-Russian Union of Poets from 1919-20. She came to Optina for the first time in 1922, when she met Elder Nektary and became his spiritual daughter. He blessed her to occupy herself with literary work, to always take care of Optina, and to do everything possible for its preservation. It was thanks to her that the monastery library and its manuscript department were taken to Moscow in 1928, and that the Monastery received the status of a cultural monument in 1974 when it was taken under government protection and restoration work began. She is buried in the Danilov cemetery in Moscow.

monasteries is summoning you." Then Fr. Nektary immediately came to the Monastery and prostrated himself before Fr. Benedict, who laughed and said, "Due to my position I won't make a prostration, but I will bow down to you." Then they began to talk as friends.

2. FR. NEKTARY'S ACTIVITY AS AN ELDER

Fr. Nektary received people in the small house of the reposed Elders Ambrose and Joseph, where he himself now lived. The little house was called the "hut." It was not large—twelve by nineteen feet—had two windows, benches along the walls, and icons and pictures of holy places in the corner. A lampada shone. Under the icons stood a table, upon which there lay brochures and leaflets of spiritual content. A door led from the reception room to the Elder's quarters; this was for men. Another door led out to a similar room where he received men and women. The entrance to this room was directly from the forest, from the outside of the Skete.

Outwardly, Elder Nektary was not tall, with a roundish face and a small, wedge-shaped beard. Long, thin locks of graying hair curled out from under his tall cap; in his hand was a prayer rope with beads. His eyes were evenly set and not large. His face was as though ageless—now old and stern, as if a thousand years old; now youthful, with a liveliness and expressiveness; now childlike, by its purity and tranquility. Even six years before his death he still walked with a light and gliding step, as if barely touching the ground. Only just before his death did he move about with difficulty; his legs, swollen like logs, oozed constantly. This spoke of his many years of standing at prayer.

In Elder Nektary there was a spiritual incisiveness and a surprising simplicity; even in deep old age he still knew how to laugh like a child.

In his reception room it was quiet and reverent; there were no conversations. Before a large icon of the Theotokos, "It Is Meet," there burned a red lampada that illumined the faces of those present.

From early morning until late at night there would be an uninterrupted flood of visitors from all corners of Russia. Here were people from the provinces of Tambov, Ryazan, Orel, Kozelsk and Smolensk. Here were simple old women, nuns, wanderers and the intelligentsia.

The Elder would come out for the general blessing wearing a cap and an ancient crimson velvet epitrachelion with worn crosses of frayed braid. He would walk along the row of people with a candle in his hand, his cell-attendant behind him. Fr. Nektary never rushed when at the general blessing and was never late. Fr. Macarius, the beekeeper, said about him: "He never came out to a visitor right away—he always gave you time to think about why you had come." He moved slowly and carefully. "It was as if he were carrying some kind of sacred cup, filled with a precious liquid, and he was exceedingly careful that not one drop be spilled from it," recalled Metropolitan Benjamin (Fedchenkov), "like all the saints who preserve in themselves the grace of God and who fear to disturb it by any kind of irreverent movement of soul—by haste, false human kindness, etc. Fr. Nektary gazed within at all times, standing in his heart before God.... All of the Elder's conduct made a reverent impression upon me, as happens in church before holy objects, before an icon, before Confession, before Communion."

During the initial period after his being chosen as Elder, Fr. Nektary increased his foolishness. He acquired a music box and a gramophone with records of spiritual music, but the skete authorities forbade him to turn it on. He had toys in his cell: automobiles, boats, trains, streetcars and later even airplanes. With these toys he created for himself a demonstration

of modern technology. He had charming miniature knick-knacks—some kind of scissors and thimbles that fit into a walnut and trinkets made of elephant ivory, which he would inspect during moments of rest. And then he had a bird call and he made grown people, who came to him with frivolous woes, blow it. He had a top which he gave a famous Russian professor to play with. He had children's books, which he handed out to adults to read. He had brushes and paints—a whole artist's set.

In his "foolishness" were often contained prophecies, but their meaning was little understood by anyone. Half a year before the revolution he began to walk around with a red bow on his chest—thus did he foretell the approaching events.

Often instead of an answer he would set up puppets before his visitors and would put on a small "show." The puppets, the characters of the show, would give answers to questions through their retorts. Thus, Bishop Theophan of Kaluga did not believe in the holiness of the Elder. When he visited Optina and came to see him, the Elder paid him no attention and busied himself with his dolls (which children had given him, as their most precious possessions, out of love for the Elder); he pushed one into prison, giving it some kind of sentence; he beat another one; a third he chastised. Bishop Theophan came to the conclusion that he was insane. But when the bolsheviks took the Bishop and put him in prison, he understood everything and said, "I'm a sinner before God and before the Elder—everything he said was about me, and I thought he was insane."

Fr. Nektary taught his spiritual children humility and patience in particular, following his instructors in this and fulfilling the Gospel precepts: *In your patience possess ye your souls* (Luke 21:19), and *God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace unto the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time* (I Pet. 5:5-6).

His favorite saying was, "In everything one must have patience and humility." According to N. Pavlovich, the Elder "taught us patience, forcing us to wait whole hours to be received, and sometimes even days. But then, how happy you would be when he received you! It was so good to be with him at the time of Compline. These were his rest hours. He did not like to answer questions at this time, and did not speak. He would sit in his armchair and, silently, would pray or doze; but his silence was always more beautiful and lofty than words. Sometimes he would ask you to read aloud to him...."

N. Pavlovich more than once went through trials of patience with the Elder. One time she came to the Elder in the morning. "Wait," he asked. She waited an hour, an hour and a half. The Elder came out, turned to her and said, "Go out, Nadenka, and call Leo to come to me." She ran to Bruni*—"Leo, Batiushka's calling you!" He was flattered that the Elder himself had sent for him. They came and waited in the reception room for an hour, two, three.... Finally the Elder appeared, joyful and radiant, and said, "Well, my dear ones, the day has yielded to evening; go home." Nadezhda could no longer contain herself and exclaimed, "How long are you going to keep skinning me, Batiushka?!" And he replied, "What a queer bird you are, Nadenka; here people sometimes send me oranges, and according to you I'm supposed to eat them with their rinds?"

According to the words of N. Pavlovich the Elder instructed those in difficult emotional circumstances and situations to

* The artist Leo Alexandrovich Bruni (1894-1948) was a childhood friend of Nadezhda A. Pavlovich. His wife was Nina Konstantinovna Balmont (daughter of the poet). They were spiritual children and great admirers of Elder Nektary and were blessed by him to marry. The Bruni family lived at Optina from 1921 to 1925. His portrait of Elder Nektary has been preserved.—Ed.

come to his grave, promising his intercession, consolation and help in afflictions.

The Elder was not only endowed by the Lord with the gift of healing bodily illnesses—he was also given the power to cast out demons. Thus, there lived in Optina a lay youth who suffered from a kind of possession. Elder Ambrose had healed him, but not once and for all. The youth retained the ability to consciously call forth certain states in himself. Once, when he and Fr. Nektary were left alone together, the youth said to the Elder, "Would you like me to show you something?" "All right." Then he sat down, became concentrated, and his body began to bend unnaturally. He threw his head back, and all his members became stiff. Then the Elder raised his hand and traced the sign of the Cross in the air. The youth remained in the same position. He made a second sign of the Cross and then a third. After the third time the youth came to himself. "What did you see?" Fr. Nektary asked him. "I saw the air as if it were layered, and the flat outlines of people and other beings," he replied. "And then I saw lightning. It flashed twice, and the third time it burst into flame, and then I came to." "See what power the sign of the Cross has?" the Elder concluded.

Instructing his spiritual children in patience and humility, Elder Nektary told them about Grand Duchess Elizabeth Fyodorovna's visit to him. She went to Optina in May of 1914. She twice visited the Elder. In the *Skete Chronicles* for May 30 it is mentioned: "At five o'clock, after her return from Shamordino, the Grand Duchess visited Fr. Nektary informally and conversed with him for a long time." And according to the Elder's words, Grand Duchess Elizabeth Fyodorovna stood for quite a while, until he offered her a seat.

Elder Nektary often reminded his visitors of the words of the Apostle, that Christ Himself, *being in the form of God,*

thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:6-8).

He would speak of the gradual ascent of the spiritual path, that "one must force oneself in all things. For example, dinner is served and you want to eat; you smell something good but the spoon won't bring the food to you itself. You must force yourself to stand up, go to the table, take up the spoon, and only then begin to eat. Nothing is done at once, instantly—in all things one must wait and be patient.

"Man is given life in order that it might serve him and not vice versa," that is, man must not become a slave to circumstances; he must not sacrifice his inner life to externals. "In serving life, a man loses his sense of proportion; he works without any rationale and becomes sadly confused, not knowing why he lives. This is a very harmful state of doubt and it often happens that a man, like a horse, plods under his load and suddenly finds himself faced with such a ... cataclysmic obstacle."

An enormous crowd of people would come to see Fr. Anatole (Potapov), who was an Elder at that time and received people in the Monastery. But at first, besides the brothers, only a few people came to see Elder Nektary.

Fr. Anatole was uncommonly simple and kind. Just to draw near to this Elder gave one a wonderful opportunity to be purified and comforted. Fr. Nektary was stricter—he tested the hearts of those who came to him and did not so much console them as point out a path of struggle. He would place a man in spiritually difficult circumstances, having great faith in the dignity and understanding of his soul, and in the mighty power of the grace of God, which aids and strengthens the soul that seeks the Truth.

N. Pavlovich recalled: "At my talks with Elder Anatole it felt as if a golden rain were pouring down, and this shower was grace. It poured down independently of you, and if you were fortunate you would get caught in that rain. But with Elder Nektary it was like this: you would feel as though a fiery sword were aimed at you—not in an angry sense, but in the sense of having your conscience laid bare."

It was at the beginning of Elder Nektary's eldership that a young, serious student, Boris Vasilievich Kholchev,* first visited him for the resolution of certain questions. Having met both Elders, Boris Vasilievich immediately sensed that Elder Nektary was his Elder. He sat for three days in the "hut" awaiting his reception by the Elder. At last Fr. Nektary's cell-attendant approached him, called him by name—although Boris had not told anyone his name—and told him that the Elder was summoning him. Later in his life, Fr. Boris always liked to tell people about the difficulties one had to overcome before he could get in to see the Elder, and he always ended by saying that whoever overcame them all, the Elder would console "with great spiritual consolation." When he asked Fr. Nektary about what he should do in the future, the Elder replied, "No, Borya, you've got to study." At his blessing he enrolled in the history-philology faculty of Moscow University. In his last years Fr. Boris would say, "Everything that Fr. Nektary said to me has already been fulfilled. There remains only one, after which I will soon die."

Concerning conversations with Fr. Nektary and his talks, the Elder's disciple, Monk Agapit (Taube) wrote: "Batiushka's talks! What were the most brilliant lectures of the best professors, or the most beautiful sermons before them? The most extraordinary imagery; a picturesque and unique form of speech.

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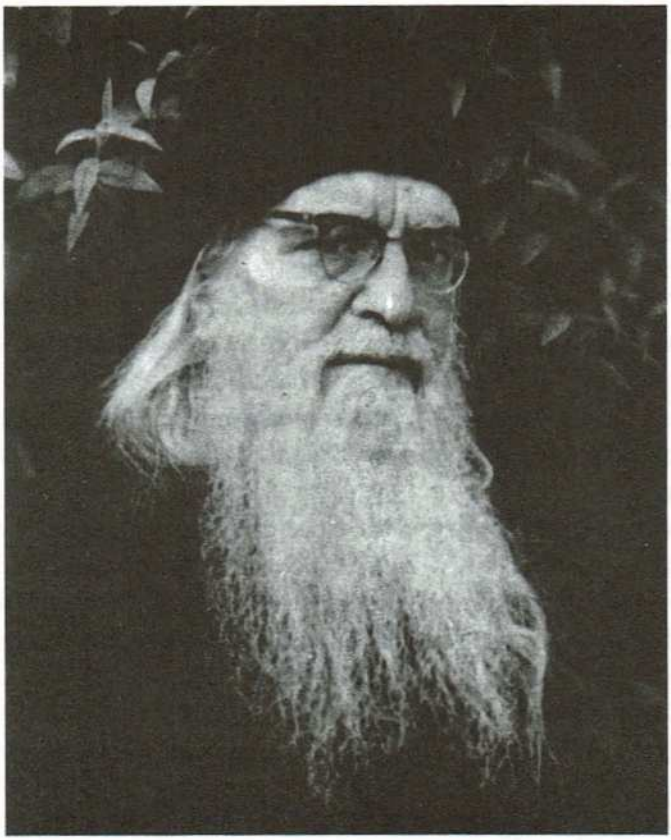
* Subsequently Archimandrite Boris (†1971), author of recollections about Elder Nektary (see p. 439).



Archimandrite Boris Kholchev.
Shortly before his repose in Tashkent.

His stories had an uncommon amount of detail—each step, each movement was described and elucidated. He interpreted the texts of the Holy Scriptures in great detail. His talks were light and smooth. Not one word diverged from the purpose, as though nothing came from himself. All was coherent and consistent. The inner unity of his ideas was not always apparent. A richness of content and a multitude of profound thoughts—each of them was food for thought for a year. An invisible string of precious stones having no end. All of his talks were easily assimilated and remained in one's memory, and were often tinged with a shade of humor—this was a living fount of living water."

The Elder's accounts of life in Optina were inexhaustible—about glorious elders and wise archimandrites and skete superiors, about the need to strictly fulfill the obediences of the elders. In terms of age, Fr. Nektary was one of the oldest inhabitants of Optina and was, as it were, a living chronicle of the Monastery.

Often the Elder would ask a person to read aloud from a letter he had received in which, as if by chance, he would find the answer to his question. Evgenia Rymarenko, Fr. Adrian's wife, recalled how, at the Elder's request, she was reading a letter to him and everything she happened to read either applied to her or was needful to Fr. Adrian.

Sometimes the Elder would leave books on the table in his reception room, and visitors, while waiting to be received, would leaf through them and find an answer to their questions.

After Fr. Anatole's repose his spiritual daughter, Anna Shaposhnikova, passed into Elder Nektary's hands. She could in no way get used to her new confessor and was already preparing to tell the Elder that she did not understand him, that he was not making her life any easier. When she came to see him, he gave her a letter to read in which someone wrote that he did

not understand the Elder, that he was not easing his life, and that he intended to leave him.

When she had finished it, Fr. Nektary asked, "You weren't planning to write me such a letter, were you?"

"No, Batiushka, I wasn't intending to write, but I did want to tell you the very same thing."

"I won't let you go; you can't live without an instructor."

"Well then, Batiushka, pray that everything will work out." He sat down and closed his eyes. He prayed thus for a long time and then they had a talk, and his visitor felt entirely at ease with him.

N. Pavlovich lived for a long time at Optina. She could in no way leave the Elder; she needed his help and support. But she had used up her money; the last handful of flour had come to an end. It became necessary for her to set out for Moscow for her wages. Suddenly some funds arrived from the post office. She came to tell Fr. Nektary about it. But he, not hearing her out, gave her something to read about how, if the Lord considered it necessary, He could turn sea pebbles into precious stones and give them to one who loved Him.

Often the answers in letters and books, at first glance, did not correspond to the questions. But once he had looked more deeply into what he had read, the visitor would find something there about himself and would understand that this was actually more important than what he had come to the Elder about, which he had insistently asked about....

Elder Nektary was at times strict and demanding, and occasionally ironical, in his conversations with the intelligentsia; but he was usually kind and accessible to simple people. One elderly peasant related: "My son disappeared without a trace during the war. I went to see Fr. Nektary. He blessed me. I asked, 'Is my son alive? How should I pray for him? We want to have his name commemorated with the dead.' But he said to me right

off, 'No, your son's alive. Serve a Moleben to St. Nicholas and always commemorate him among the living.' I was overjoyed, bowed to him and gave him a rouble for candles. And he bowed down so humbly to me in reply."

The Elder was particularly attentive to the more sinful of his visitors or to those of his spiritual children who were rebellious. His cell-attendant Peter said that "he would leave the ninety-nine righteous to take one and save him." When people were going through periods of disobedience and trouble he acted with fatherly kindness and called them not by name but "my precious child," or "my little lamb," and the trouble was calmed. Even the most obstinate and unruly felt the sincerity of this great love.

But Fr. Nektary could also be strict. One time N. Pavlovich came to him in a happy state. His cell-attendant said, "Batiushka, today's her nameday." Fr. Nektary, neither congratulating nor blessing her, asked her sternly, "And did you prepare for your nameday?"

"I didn't know you had to prepare yourself for a nameday. Why didn't you tell me?"

"That means you have no zeal! Today you'll have a fasting dinner with tears; but if you had prepared, there would have been a cake." And he gave her nothing; he only blessed her.

Other people also recalled incidents of the Elder's severity. Once in the "hut" a woman was weeping inconsolably. One after another her children had died, and she had just buried the last one. She had come "for consolation." The Elder came out for the general blessing and was proceeding down the line, when the woman threw herself at his feet in tears. He continued further, and with a face of stone said, "This is a punishment for your sins!"

Fr. Peter (the Elder's cell attendant) wrote the following: "One time I was sweeping the reception room and there were

gingerbread crumbs scattered everywhere. A. P. came in and said, 'What did you have here, a dance or a fight?' And a woman who was there said, 'It's true—there was almost a spiritual fight. He [the Elder] gave one little bag of gingerbreads to me and another to another spiritual daughter. But the latter got angry and slapped his hand, and the gingerbreads were scattered about. Then she walked out and fell flat on her back.'"

The novice Ivan Mitrofanovich Belyaev* told the following story: "[Fr. Patrick] was sometimes harsh in his words. I recall that he once said something crude to Fr. Nektary that disconcerted him. In my recollection this happened twice. When Fr. Nektary became upset he expressed his displeasure in a particular way, as in this instance. Right then, in the presence of the offender, he turned to Fr. Athanasius and said, 'Fr. Athanasius! Tell Fr. Patrick that he's a lout!' And he quickly withdrew. At a later time, when Fr. Nektary had become an elder, Fr. Patrick went to him with some kind of question, just as one would go to an elder. The question was somehow complicated and Fr. Patrick, as he admitted, did not think that Fr. Nektary could resolve it. Having returned from the Elder, he said with astonishment, 'How great is the power of eldership! Fr. Nektary has solved such a question that would only be possible for a great elder to solve!'"

Once the Elder was blessing those that had come to see him, amongst whom was a young woman who was living in Optina and acting like a fool according to her own will. She sang worldly songs, laughed senselessly and cursed. And she was standing there, waiting for a blessing. Suddenly the Elder raised his hand and, threatening with a gesture to push her aside, began to step back from her. After he had disappeared behind the door, the young woman fell into convulsions.

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* The brother of novice Nicholas M. Belyaev—the cell-attendant to Elder Barsanuphius and the future Optina Elder Nikon.

As if following the precept of St. Anthony the Great, that "one must not keep a bowstring taut constantly," the Elder sprinkled his instructions and strict demands with a joke, a funny story or a tale.

Fr. Nektary had a cat with which he played. He tied a piece of paper with string for it. The cat obeyed him like a human being. The Elder said, "Elder Gerasimus was a great elder,* and he had a lion; but we're small, so we have a cat." And he would tell a story of how a cat saved Noah's ark. When an unclean spirit entered into a mouse and tried to gnaw through the bottom of the ark, the cat caught that pernicious mouse and ate it. And for this all cats will go to heaven.

With each day the number of visitors to Elder Nektary's "hut" grew and grew. People were convinced that the Elder's word was always effectual: it instructed, it assisted and it confirmed one in faith.

The Elder's spiritual children were of different sorts. For each person he had "his own measure": "One must not demand the work of a bee from a fly; each person must be given according to his measure. You can't treat everyone the same." Though Elder Nektary was a spiritual guide, he did not lead a person along as though he were blind. He believed in each person's ability to make an intelligent choice: "I have lit the lamp, but take care of the wick yourselves."

Spiritual sobriety was developed in him to a high degree—no ecstatic emotions, no impassioned displays of feelings, no sentimentality in his Christian love for people. Though he himself was a great ascetic, he would with love bless his spiritual children to marry and would speak about the secular education of children. When some parents were upset over the antireligious character of the soviet schools, the Elder

* St. Gerasimus of the Jordan, a fourth century saint who was served by a lion. Commemorated on March 4.—Ed.

said, "After all, your children will be soviet citizens; they should go to the public schools. And if you want them to preserve Christianity, let them see a truly Christian life at home."

Concerning wisdom in the human soul, the Elder said that it is enkindled when the soul cries out to God, "My Father and the Lord of my virginity!" Then God restores virginity to the soul of the harlot and she becomes "the bride of Christ, sister of the Word."

He placed a high value on human labor. When one of his spiritual daughters was distressed as to how she was going to live without guidance after he died, he answered, "Work! Work makes the years fly by unnoticeably."

3. CONFESSION WITH ELDER NEKTARY

At Confession Fr. Nektary was very serious, strict and concentrated. Despite his strictness he was always kind and did not scold anyone, even when they expected it. Once nun Elena asked him to give her a penance for her correction, but the Elder only said, *By the Lord are the steps of a man rightly directed* (Ps. 36:23). She complained about her incorrigibility and grieved over it, but the Elder consoled her: "Let weakness and repentance take turns until your death. And there's this in the Prologue:* 'If he who has sinned shall say, "O Lord, I have sinned; forgive me," this will be better for him than a royal crown.'"

At times the Elder was gentle at Confession and even joked. Once he had a woman read her confession according to the book.** The repenting woman stopped at one point. "What's

* The Prologue is a book containing Lives of Saints and homilies for each day of the year.—ED.

** Such books contained prayers, lists of sins and "model" confessions, as an aid to penitents.—ED.

the matter?" asked Fr. Nektary. "I'm thinking about whether I've sinned in this or not." "Well, give it some thought—or perhaps you'd rather cross it out of the book?" he said, smiling.

Concerning Confession he would say that the matter did not consist in its complexity, but in contrition of heart. *The Lord looketh on the heart* (I Kings 16:7). He pointed to the spiritual significance of thoughts and words, and not only of deeds.

It seemed that he always knew ahead of time what people would say to him. Evgenia Rymarenko wrote of such a confession with the Elder: "Today I confessed to Fr. Nektary for the first time. I was the very last to go in. He seated me on the couch and he himself stood beside me in his epitrachelion and cuffs. Again there were conversations and questions. I went over my whole life, in the process of which it was often not I that spoke, but the Elder himself who as it were reminded me of certain important events and acts. The whole time I had the thought, 'What if I forget something or explain something incorrectly?' But the further we went the more I sensed that there was no need to explain anything to him. He himself explained why or how one thing or another had occurred in my life. Finally, he asked, 'Do you wish to approach Divine Communion tomorrow?'

"'Yes. Yes, Batiushka.'

"'Well then, approach Divine Grace,' and he led me over to the icons.

"I thought, 'Now the Confession will begin.' Suddenly I felt the epitrachelion on my head and heard the words of the prayer of absolution...."

Elder Nektary's spiritual daughter, Nina D., said the following:

"Once I wanted to receive Communion, and wanted Fr. Nektary to commune me with his own hands, like Mother E. 'No, no; while it's still possible in church, you take advantage of

it. Place the holy intention in your heart to prepare yourself to commune tomorrow.' But I had no such intention. In the evening I went to him for Confession. Well, I had written down my sins, but I had no repentance—it was only a whim. He met me: 'Let's pray together!' And he began to say, *'Lord, have mercy!* Repeat after me—*Lord, have mercy!'*

"At first I repeated it unconsciously. But he kept going at a higher and higher pitch: *'Lord, have mercy!'* And this was such a prayerful cry that I began to tremble all over. Then he stood me before the icons and said, 'Pray!' and left for his cell. I prayed, and when my voice became weaker, his voice prompted me from his cell: *'Lord, have mercy!'* When I had come to an awareness of my sinfulness he came out and began to confess me. 'Batiushka,' I said, 'I've written down my sins.'

"'What a good girl! Well, read them.' I read them. 'Do you acknowledge that you're sinful in all this?'

"'I acknowledge it, Batiushka, I acknowledge it.'

"'Do you believe that the Lord will absolve you of all these sins?'

"'Batiushka, I have a grudge against one individual and I can't forgive.'

"'No, Ninochka, you'll forgive in time. I'll take all of your sins upon myself.' He pressed my head to himself and kissed it. He read the prayer of absolution and said to me, 'Go to church tomorrow, to Matins, and come to me from there. Whatever is omitted in church, we'll do here.'

"In the morning they didn't read Morning Prayers, so the Elder had me read them with him. I read them as though standing before the throne of God, and each word remained deep in my heart. Then he gave me the Akathist before Communion, which only priests read, and I read it with fear. Then he blessed me to go to church, and Communion was wondrous and solemn."

There is an account of the confession with Fr. Nektary of a woman who had not confessed her sins since childhood. She was estranged from the Church and did not herself know whether she had faith. She had come to the Elder by happenstance, accompanying her sick husband. The Elder made a powerful impression on her and when he offered to confess her, she agreed. He led her up to the icons—"Stand here and pray!"—and went himself into his cell. She stood there and looked at the icons and did not like them—they were not artistic, and even the lampada seemed odd. It was quiet in the room—only on the other side of the wall Fr. Nektary was walking and rustling something. Suddenly she felt a sadness and contrition and imperceptibly she began to weep involuntarily. Tears clouded her eyes and she could no longer see the icons and lampadas; there was only an iridescent cloud before her eyes, behind which she sensed the presence of God. When the Elder came out she was standing there all covered with tears. "Recite *Our Father,*" he commanded. She somehow stumbled through it. "Recite the Symbol of Faith." "I don't remember it." Then the Elder began himself to read it and after each article he asked her, "Do you believe in this way?" To the first two she answered, "I believe!" When he reached the third article she said that she did not understand it and that she felt nothing for the Theotokos. He reproached her and bade her pray to the Heavenly Queen for an explanation, that she herself would teach her how to understand the Symbol of Faith. Concerning the majority of the other articles of the Symbol of Faith the woman said that she did not understand them and had never thought about it, but she wept bitterly and felt the whole time that she could conceal nothing and that it would have been senseless to hide anything. She felt right then as though it were a prefiguring of the Dread Judgment. The Elder asked her about her personal sins as though she were a child, so that she began to

answer him with a smile through her tears. Then he forgave all her sins from her childhood to that hour.

Once the Elder was asked if he had to take upon himself the sufferings and sins of those who came to him, so as to relieve or console them. "There's no other way to relieve them," he said. "And really, sometimes you feel just as if there were a mountain of stones weighing down upon you—so much sin and pain do they bring to you, and you just can't bear it. Then grace comes and sweeps away this mountain of stones as if it were a mountain of dry leaves. Then you can receive people again."

4. PROPHETIC MINISTRY

The yoke of eldership is terrible and heavy. And to be an elder every second is beyond a man's powers. An elder is surrounded by the great love of the people—but by great demands as well. Many of the Elder's visitors tried to interpret his every gesture symbolically; for instance, people would sometimes cry if the Elder gave them candy: "They say if he gives candy it means that sorrows await me!" At times he found this quite burdensome. Once he related: "Sometimes I have presentiments and something is revealed to me about a man, and sometimes not. There was an amazing case. A woman came to me and complained about her son, a nine-year-old boy, that he was impossible to deal with. And I said to her, 'Be patient until he's twelve years old.' I said this, not having any presentiment; it was just that, according to science, I knew that at the age of twelve a person often undergoes a change. The woman left and I forgot about her. Three years later the mother came weeping, 'My son died; he just turned twelve.' People said, 'See, Batiushka foretold it,' but really this was just my simple reasoning based on what I've learned. I later checked myself in every way—did I have any kind of premonition or not? No, I felt nothing."

Sometimes the Elder would come right out and say, "To you this is a mystery, but I know it."

Once Tatiana Galitskaya came to see the Elder, and he began to wipe her eyes with a kerchief. She soon understood the Elder's prophecy. In this way he had foretold to her the misfortunes that would assail her family: the serious wounding of her eldest son, the illness of the youngest (typhoid fever), the tragic loss of her husband (who fell under a train), hunger, evacuation....

Once one of Elder Nektary's spiritual daughters did not want to come to him for a blessing, but decided to go straight to church for the Vigil in order to grab a better spot next to a bench, so she could sit down. The next day the Elder received her and made her stand up for a long, long time, so that her knees began to hurt. And he said, "What of it—yesterday you sat, so now you'll stand."

In Nizhnie Pryski there lived an artist, Nicholas Nikiforovich Belyaev. He loved Optina, frequently visited it, and met with Elder Nektary. During the first World War, being a soldier, he became acquainted with an English officer to whom he suggested that he visit Optina. The Englishman, who regarded Russians with coldness and haughtiness, nevertheless decided out of curiosity to go to the Monastery. No sooner had he stepped across the threshold of Elder Nektary's cell, than the Elder began to speak with him in English, disclosing his inner state. This so astonished the proud Englishman that he was profoundly touched, and for a long time could not forget that inimitable meeting.

In the words of Nina D., "When Fr. Nektary had become an Elder, I once went to see him with my friends for the New Year. He received us right away and at first kept talking about the fate of my friend: 'Your fate will be decided after a cup of tea.' That's just what happened later. She was drinking tea with

Elder Anatole; then her mother came in, and right then and there he blessed her to become a nun.

"Elder Anatole died and I moved to the Briansk province. I was glad that Fr. Nektary was living there. One woman in my village saw a monk-elder with tearful eyes in a dream, who said to her, 'Come see me.' By her description I recognized the Elder and offered to go together with her to see him. The same day that we came to him he had refused to have dinner: 'I'm going to have guests today, whom we'll have to feed.' And it's true that we arrived hungry. Mother E. went to inform him about us, but she didn't know our names. She came from Fr. Nektary and said to me, 'Is your name Nina? The Elder said that Nina D. has come, that he's been waiting for her for a long time.' When I went in he said, 'Fr. Anatole entrusted you to me and pleaded on your behalf. I've been waiting and praying for you for three years—and now you've deigned to visit.' And that woman who had come with me, as soon as she saw him began to cry out, 'It was you who called me, Batiushka—I've come to you!' But the Elder left at once for his room.

"'Batiushka, I miss you,' I once said.

"'I'm always with you. But when you're sad and miss me, go out on the porch and speak with me by "wireless telephone," and I'll answer you; I'll answer without fail.'"

N. Pavlovich recalled Fr. Nektary's clairvoyance: "We were accustomed only to read in books about the miracles and clairvoyance of the saints. And here we lived for seven years before his clairvoyant gaze and accepted it as though it were something normal—sometimes even laughing. The Elder himself sometimes clothed his clairvoyance in a humorous form. Returning to Optina (from Moscow) I once began to reveal to the Elder all my new theological concoctions (about gnosticism). He listened, grinned, and with an indescribable expression, said: 'What? Haven't you heard enough from Vladimir?' Vladimir

was the name of a gnostic scholar. But the Elder did not know that I was acquainted with him. Once we were planning to visit this professor. The Elder detained us for two hours. Then he laughed and said, 'Oh, were you planning to go visiting? I had no idea.'"

Once, when Fr. Nektary was already in exile, N. Pavlovich was sitting with him in the evening. "The Elder was sitting in his armchair.... He was endlessly affectionate with me, but I was bored. Everything he would say seemed boring and uninteresting. The very air in his room was stuffy from boredom. And so, with boredom and listlessness, I said, 'Well, are you going to take me with you (to paradise)?' And he said, 'But after all, wherever I'll be, you'll be bored.'"

In his talks, the Elder repeatedly foretold the grievous time which was soon to begin and prepared his spiritual children for the coming trials. Long before the revolution the Lord revealed visions of the approaching catastrophe to him. He prophesied that, "Soon they will close the monasteries, and it will be forbidden to walk the streets in monastic garb."

In the cell journal of Fr. Terentius, one of the monks of the Skete, the following entry was made in 1916: "There will be a revolution; they will murder the Tsar and destroy Optina, and will drive their flocks into the Skete." N. Pavlovich recalled that once, coming to the Skete, she saw a peasant driving his cow there to graze, and she was painfully shocked.

After the revolution Elder Nektary spoke of a vision which one monk had long before the revolution. Sitting on the porch of his cell, he suddenly saw everything disappear—both houses and trees. In their stead, up to the heavens, were ranks of saints arranged in circles; between the highest rank and heaven there remained a very small space. It was revealed to the monk that when that space was filled up, the end of the world would come. "And the space was already not large," said the Elder.

Many, knowing of the Elder's prophetic gift, asked, "What awaits us?" Elder Nektary responded, "St. Seraphim foresaw the revolution and the church schism but would say, 'If there are preserved in Russia even a few faithful Orthodox people, God will have mercy on her.' And we have such righteous ones. A foreboding of social catastrophes hangs over humanity. They feel this instinctively, like ants. But the faithful are capable of not being afraid—grace guards them. In the last times the same thing will happen with the faithful as happened with the Apostles before the Dormition of the Mother of God. Each of the faithful, no matter where he is, will be borne on a cloud to the Ark of the Church. Only those who are found to be in it will be saved."

Nina D. said: "I once came to see the Elder and inquired: 'Everyone says that all the signs of the Second Coming have been fulfilled.' But he replied, 'No, not all. But of course, its obvious even to the glance of an ordinary person that many have been fulfilled; but to that of a spiritual person it's plain to see: earlier the Church was a vast circle reaching to the whole horizon; but now it's like a ringlet—do you see?—like a ringlet. And in the last days before Christ's coming it will be preserved in the following form: one Orthodox Bishop, one Orthodox priest and one Orthodox layman. I'm not saying that there won't be any churches at all—maybe there will be—but Orthodoxy itself will be preserved only in such a form. You pay attention to these words; understand—this is in the whole world.'"

The Elder repeated more than once, "Hold firmly to Orthodoxy.... We are now living in the times indicated in the Apocalypse—after the Angel's exclamation, *Woe unto those living* (cf. Apoc. 8:13) and before the appearance of the locusts.

"History shows us how God guides the nations and gives as it were moral lessons to the world." And he added with a quiet sigh, "Worldly life measures years, centuries, millenia; but the

most important thing is that 'it was morning and it was evening, one day.' In the process there may be narrowing and widening, but no matter how long a man lives it will always be the same: 'morning, evening—one day.' The hardest object is stone, and the most gentle is water. But drop after drop the water pierces through the stone."

"The time for prayer has come," Fr. Nektary instructed his spiritual children. "During your work say the Jesus Prayer—at first with your lips, then with your mind, and then it will pass into your heart." And he gave them a handwritten prayer that he himself had composed: "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Who art coming to judge the living and the dead, have mercy on us sinful ones; forgive our sinful falls in this, our life, and by the judgments which Thou knowest protect us from the face of antichrist in the innermost desert of Thy salvation." He once noted, "Our most grievous afflictions are like insect bites compared with the afflictions of the future age."

Concerning the future of Russia he foretold that after years of trials she would leap up and would not be rich materially, but would be rich in spirit, and that in Optina there would yet be seven luminaries, seven pillars.

5. WARNINGS CONCERNING FALSE TEACHINGS AND DEVIATIONS FROM ORTHODOXY

Elder Nektary frequently warned those who came to him against the passion for mystical currents which had become fashionable at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially among the intelligentsia. Concerning mysticism, Fr. Nektary used to say, "It's a multicolored rainbow—one end rests on the sea, the other on the earth, and mysticism itself is the arch. Those learned in mysticism say that we are resting on the earth. But what is there? Just dirt! To them there remains the sea—a

lofty domain.... Well, do you understand?" he asked his listeners and then he explained: "The image of the sea in patristic literature is an image of all that is uncertain, shaken by the passions and fluctuating."

The Elder fought especially against the spread of spiritism (a mystical teaching whose followers would summon spirits and the "souls of the dead"): "Educated people are often captivated by the teachings of spiritism, sincerely thinking that this path leads to salvation. But no! From it flows only sickness."*

The wise counsel of Elder Nektary could be applied to many deceptive mystical teachings which likewise lead the soul astray by appearing to have contact with the spiritual world (theosophy, for example). Concerning other confessions of the Christian faith, the Elder spoke thus: "Wisdom has built herself a house with seven pillars. Orthodoxy has these seven pillars. But God's wisdom has other dwellings—they may have six pillars or fewer, and accordingly a lesser measure of grace." He said, "In the last times the world will be girded about with iron and paper. But such were the days of Noah: the flood was drawing near. Noah knew about it and told the people, but they didn't believe. He hired workers to build the ark and they, building the ark, didn't believe, for which reason they only received wages for their work but were not saved. Those days are the foreshadowing of our own days. The ark is the Church. Only those who are inside will be saved."

When one of his spiritual children asked, "But what about the millions of Chinese, Indians, Turks and other non-Christians?" the Elder replied, "God desires not only that nations be saved, but each individual soul. A simple Indian, believing in his own way in the Creator and fulfilling His will as best he can, will be saved; but he who, knowing about Christianity, follows the Indian mystical path, will not."

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* See "Conversion of a Spiritist," p. 286.

Once N. Pavlovich asked the Elder, "Is it possible to hope for the unification of the churches?" He replied, "No! Only an Ecumenical Council could do that, but there will be no more councils. There have already been seven councils, like the seven sacraments and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. For our age, the number of fulness is the number seven. Eight is the number of the future age. Only separate people will be united to our Church."

Not long before the revolution Fr. Nektary said to Sergei Nilus, "As long as eldership is still maintained in Optina, its precepts will be fulfilled. But when they will seal the 'huts' of the Elders and hang locks on the doors—well, one can expect anything then."

And that time came....

3

The Sayings of Elder Nektary

1. ON PRAYER

ELDER NEKTARY SPOKE OFTEN and lovingly about prayer: "According to the Word of God, all impurities are cleansed through prayer. The soul cannot be reconciled with life [without it] and can be consoled only through prayer. Without prayer the soul is dead to grace."

"Everything is asked for through prayer," the Elder would repeat. "You've still only come up to the first step—you haven't ascended it, but have only come up to it. But you still need to go through the door, and it's impossible to enter through any kind of effort if the mercy of God is not there. Therefore, in the first place, you've got to ask, 'Open unto me the doors of Thy mercy.' Everything is obtained by prayerful entreaty. Adam was in Paradise. The commandment was to 'cultivate and guard'—concerning prayer. But Adam heedlessly contemplated nothing but beauty. He was not thankful to God."

"When you're sad and despondent and find yourself in severe temptations, repeat only one thing—'O Lord, help, save and have mercy upon Thy slave!'"

"At all times, whatever you do—sitting, walking or working, say in your heart, 'Lord, have mercy!' When there are afflictions and you have no strength to bear them, then turn in your

heart to the Lord, to the Mother of God, to St. Nicholas, to the saint whose name you bear—and the afflictions will be relieved."

He advised people to say in the face of all kinds of failures: "O Lord, I believe that I am enduring what is due to me and am getting what I deserve. But Thou, O Lord, according to Thy loving-kindness, forgive and have mercy on me."—"And repeat this," he would say, "until you feel peace in your soul."

"There are people," Elder Nektary noted, "that never turn to God, never pray. And suddenly their soul experiences melancholy, their head restlessness and their heart sadness. And a man feels that in this disastrous situation no other human being can help him—he might hear him out but would be unable to understand his misery. Then a man turns to God, and with a deep sigh says, 'Lord, have mercy!' And the Lord hears, though at first the man barely senses the grace; later he feels it more and more, and feels relief."

Another time he taught, "The predicament of Job is a law for each man. While a man is rich, prominent and successful, God does not reply. When he is on a dunghill, abandoned by all, then God appears and converses with him, and the man only listens and cries out, 'Lord, have mercy!'"

"It would seem to be enough to say 'Lord, have mercy' once in prayer; but we say it three and twelve and forty times. This is for those suffering souls who can't even utter 'Lord, have mercy.' And so the Church prays for them," explained Fr. Nektary.

One woman said, "Batiushka, I get very irritated." He replied, "As soon as you feel yourself in an irritated state, only repeat, 'Lord, have mercy.' Anything nasty can be cleansed by prayer."

To the question of one of his spiritual daughters on how to pray, the Elder slowly placed the sign of the Cross upon

himself, bowed low, touching his right hand to the ground, and said: "Pray like this. Pray physically, and the Lord will send His grace to help you. Pray that the Lord would reign in your heart, and then it will be infused with great exultation and joy, and no manner of sorrow will have the power to disturb it." Once he advised, "Pray simply: 'O Lord, grant me Thy grace!' A storm-cloud of woes will come upon you, but you just pray, 'O Lord, grant me Thy grace!' and the Lord will carry the storm past you."

The Elder was asked how one should pray for those about whom it was not known whether or not they were still alive. "You will not be amiss," he responded, "if you pray for them as living, since before God all are alive. All except heretics and apostates. These are the dead ones. If you wish, you might as well remember them as something dead."

About the Six Psalms he said, "The Six Psalms must not be read like kathismas, but like prayers. The meaning of the Six Psalms is very deep; it is the prayer of the Son to God the Father."

Once N. Pavlovich told the Elder that at times she experienced fear, often for no reason. Fr. Nektary said, "Just cross your arms over your chest and recite three times, *O Theotokos and Virgin Rejoice...*, and it will all pass." And so it would.

She recalled his room in Kholmishche: "A lampada and a candle were burning before the icons. I entered, and he was sitting in his armchair wearing his epitrachelion. Suddenly he arose with a groan and pointed to me to follow him to the icons. It was impossible to endure that suffering groan of his (when he got up because of me), and with fear I supported him as he walked. And there, before the icons, the boundary between the worlds totally disappeared. I felt as though a wave of God's presence were moving from there, and that the Elder, right beside me, was the recipient of that wave. I knelt a little behind

him, not looking at him, and only holding on, either to his hand or his riassa."

Once an old coachman named Timothy fell on his knees before the Elder, his face transfigured by faith, contrition and hope: "Batiushka, give me spiritual instruction, that your warm ray might kindle my cold soul, that it might blaze up towards the celestial path...." After this clever phrase he said simply, "Batiushka, I have no tears." And the Elder with a wonderful smile leaned towards him and said, "That's all right—your soul is weeping, and such tears are far more precious than bodily ones."

One of his visitors asked him to give her a prayer rule, having heard that he had assigned one to others. In answer, the Elder related the following instructive story: "The Savior chose for Himself disciples from among the simple, illiterate people. He called them, and they cast aside everything and followed after Him. He did not give them any kind of prayer rule. He gave them complete freedom from obligation, like children. But the Savior Himself, when He had finished preaching, withdrew to a deserted place and prayed. He had called His own disciples; but disciples came to John the Baptist of their own free will. The Baptist did not call them, but they came. What kind of rule he gave them remains unknown, but he did teach them to pray. And when John's disciples came to the Savior, they told the Apostles that they prayed, and the latter suddenly realized—here John's disciples pray, and our Good Master hasn't said half a word to us about prayer. And they approached Him so seriously, as if to reproach Him—here John's disciples pray and we don't. But if John's disciples hadn't said anything to them, they wouldn't have thought about it. And the Savior gave them *Our Father.* But He gave them no other prayer."

Another time the Elder said, "Using many words in prayer is harmful, as the Apostle said. The main thing is love and zeal

towards God" (cf. I Pet. 4:8-11). Then he added that it is better to say one prayer in a day and another on the next with attention than to say them both right away without attentiveness. This does not mean that the Elder limited the order of prayer or the daily rule to one prayer. He was speaking of the capacity of beginners who only had the power to concentrate for one prayer and recited the others absent-mindedly.

He strictly enjoined his disciples never to take up the Jesus Prayer on their own, and spoke about this: "Know that at the outset it will be very difficult and hard—after all, you've got to enter into your own soul and such gloom will meet you there. Only later—not soon—will the light begin to dawn. You have to wait and take on many afflictions." The Elder taught the nun Thaisia the Jesus Prayer in such a way that it began to work on its own, without being forced.*

The Elder taught that attention must be paid to one's thoughts. "Stop thinking; start concentrating on thoughts." In other words, to think is to diffuse the thought so that it lacks proper direction. "Once there was a Duma** that thought but did not contemplate, as a government should. Napoleon thought, but Kutuzov*** contemplated. Contemplation is higher than thought."

Fr. Nektary often spoke of the great power of church prayers and the divine services. "One need not demand or seek miracles on earth; we have a miracle—Divine Liturgy. This is the greatest miracle and one must bow down before it and become a part of it."

When one of his spiritual daughters departed from him for a time, her friend told Fr. Nektary, "She's so lonely." "But is she

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* See p. 374.

** Russian Parliament. The word "duma" comes from the verb meaning "to think."—TRANS.

***Kutuzov, a pious man, was the general that defeated Napoleon.—ED.

receiving Communion?" asked the Elder. "Yes." "Then she's not alone."

When preparing his spiritual children for Communion, the Elder was especially strict in demanding that they read through the entire Rule before Holy Communion. He told one spiritual daughter, "Never dare to receive Holy Communion without Confession beforehand." He related that one Optina hieromonk appeared to him after his death and told him that he had been delivered from the toll-houses, since he had always served Liturgy at peace with all and had read through the whole Rule. "But the most important rule," taught Elder Nektary, "is love and peace."

The Elder said, "When you are preparing for Communion, be less verbal and more prayerful." And then he added, "The power of prayer is not in many words, but in the sincerity of one's prayerful sighs."

According to the notes of Fr. Peter, the Elder's second cell-attendant, Fr. Nektary said: "If you can't fulfill the Rule of five hundred, then at least do one hundred." Fr. Peter said that the Elder, especially loving the Heavenly Queen, always told people to read her Akathist. He also said that Fr. Nektary placed humility and love higher than fasting.

The Elder counseled not to rush to any kind of business after Holy Communion, but to free oneself from obligations until midday, read the Holy Scriptures, and abide in prayer and thanksgiving to the Lord. He reminded his spiritual children repeatedly to thank the Lord for all His blessings. As an example of sincere thankfulness he would cite the story of St. Eleazar of Anzersk Skete:*

* St. Eleazar (†1656, commemorated January 13) was the founder of the Anzersk Skete of Solovki Monastery in the White Sea.—Ed.

Synaxis of Solovki Saints. St. Eleazar is second from the left.

Once he went out at night onto the porch of his cell and, gazing upon the beauty and stillness of the surrounding nature of Anzersk Skete, he became compunctionate to the point of tears. And from his heart, opened by Divine love, there escaped a prayerful sigh: "O Lord, what beauty this is, created by Thee! By what means, and in what way can I, a contemptible worm, thank Thee for all Thy great and rich mercies towards me?"

And due to the power of the saint's prayerful sigh the heavens were opened and there appeared before his spiritual sight a myriad of the light-bearing heavenly host, and they sang the great angelic doxology: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.* And an invisible voice announced to the saint: "And thou also, Eleazar, by these words give thanks to thy Maker and Creator."

At times Fr. Nektary would say with a sigh, "The present generation has ceased to give thanks to the Lord, and so there is a lack of everything...."

According to the recollections of the Elder's spiritual children he prayed with childlike faith and simplicity, at times stretching out his hands towards the icons. When Elder Nektary recited *Our Father,* the lightness and simplicity of his tone was astonishing; it felt as though the Lord were right there beside him, and the Elder were conversing with Him.

Elder Nektary counseled people to read patristic literature and Lives of Saints, but above all he taught the assiduous and attentive reading of the Holy Scriptures. When conversing, Fr. Nektary frequently quoted them and brought forth examples, speaking of their literal and allegorical meanings. He would recount them at length, vividly, in all their details, as if he himself had been a participant in or witness to the ancient events of sacred history.

For instance, he interpreted the words of the Psalm of David, *Blessed is the man, that hath not walked in the counsel of*

the ungodly (Ps. 1:1), thus: "In its external aspect, this means that a man is blessed, who flees impure gatherings, who does not take part in heretical or anti-church teachings. But the mind is also called a man, when it does not accept the thoughts that come from the enemy. It is impossible to forbid such thoughts to come, but it is possible not to confer with them or to entertain them, but to say instead, 'Lord, have mercy!' And you'll see how all that is earthly departs. Thus, he who acts in this manner is called a man."

2. ON HUMILITY

The Elder saw humility as the beginning and foundation of the spiritual path.

The Elder would humbly say, "I feel poorly, but in my weakness is He made strong. This alone comforts me, that it's well with Him. And how amazingly well it is. When I look at myself and see that I'm in such a poor state, but that it's well with my brother—this comforts me. I admit that I'm wretched. But the grace of God is good, and this is given to my brother. And since I am of one faith with my brother, the 'good' of my brother comes upon me as a blessing—not my goodness, but my brother's." Here the words "of one faith" are particularly striking, for this unity of faith provides a means, as it were, for the operation of grace.

Both at the beginning of his stay in the Skete and when he was an experienced spiritual instructor, Fr. Nektary always spoke of himself with humility. He would say to himself, "What kind of Elder am I? How can I follow in the footsteps of the former Elders? I'm weak and infirm. They had whole loaves of wisdom and I have but a slice." And, "I'm in my novitiate, I'm still learning, I've lost all sense.... I'm the oldest in the Monastery by far, according to years; I've lived here for more than fifty

years, but I'm the least according to virtue." Recalling Elder Ambrose he said, "This was a heavenly man and an earthly angel, but I'm barely maintaining the glory of eldership."

Concerning Fr. Anatole Zertsalov, the Elder said, "For twenty years I was under his guidance and was the least of his sons and disciples, which makes me weep even now." And turning to one of his visitors he added, "So there you have it, my dear Matushka; if you want to be a nun, always consider yourself to be the last daughter and a poor disciple. You must always think of yourself as being at the very beginning."

The same nun related: "Once the Elder asked a nun, 'Well, Matushka, how is your spiritual life progressing?' 'Very well, Batiushka!' she replied in all simplicity. 'Well!' he repeated. Then he went into his room and after some time returned, stern and angry. She asked him about various matters concerning which his advice was needed, but he was silent. Then, indicating another priest, he said, 'Don't come to me. I refuse to have anything more to do with you.' She began to cry, but he didn't even look at her. She began to despair. Then he took her by the hand and led her to the icon corner. 'Tell me, do you want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?' he asked sternly, as though he was about to hit her. She was silent. 'Speak up, do you want this?' 'I do!' she answered through her tears. 'Well then, don't expect anything easier. I don't know of any other path to get there. But if you want another, look for it yourself.' And again he went away. She was so distressed that her head became clouded with sorrow. Then he softened a bit and gave her the lives of two Sarov elders to read—one very stern and the other softer and more gentle. The stern one sent beginning novices to the less strict elder, knowing that they would not be able to bear his harshness and would fall away. With this same sternness did Fr. Nektary's Elders bring him up, and he likewise led his disciples along the same path. He did not pull at the bit, but let up

from time to time so as not to overstrain. He said to one of his spiritual daughters, 'I assure you that we will have examinations and maneuvers, and then we will have spiritual joy.' She objected, 'Batiushka, I'm already grown up; what kind of examinations will I have?' 'No, no! We will definitely have examinations and re-examinations.'"

With subtle humor the Elder once said, "I'm an ant and crawl along the ground where I see all the potholes and ditches, but the brothers are lofty and ascend to the clouds. *Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise* (Prov. 6:6). This was not said by a worldly writer, but is read in church. Did you hear the Old Testament readings? And who are we, Fr. Anatole [Potapov] and I? We're just ants. And you've come to us. Now Krilov,* your Petersburg librarian, wrote about the ant, and how the dragonfly came to him. Do you know the story?" Fr. Nektary began to smile as he told the end of the fable.

To some visitors the Elder would say, "You'd better ask my cell-attendant, Fr. Sebastian, about this; he can advise you better than I can—he's clairvoyant. Fr. Sebastian (Fomin, reposed 1966) subsequently became a schema-archimandrite, the clairvoyant Elder of Karaganda [in Kazakhstan].

3. ON LOVE

He considered the most important thing on the spiritual path to be love for one's neighbor, for *he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him* (I John 4:16). "First of all," the Elder repeated, "you must love your neighbor; but love sincerely, and not with calculation. Love is the most beautiful, the most sacred thing. It is such beauty! But people have distorted

* A very popular 19th-century Russian poet and writer of fables, as well as the translator of Aesop's Fables into Russian.—Ed.

it; it must be as it was with Christ, when He suffered for us." He always cautioned against judging one's neighbor. "As soon as a judgment comes into your head, immediately turn to the Lord with attention: 'O Lord, grant me to see my own faults and not to judge my brother.'"*

To the question, "How must one love Christ?" the Elder responded, "Take a lesson from Christ Himself—*Love one another as I have loved you...* (John 13:34). First of all you must love your neighbor, and from your neighbor your love will pass over to Christ."

He named charity as one of the manifestations of love for one's neighbor. But he commanded that it be given with discretion. The Elder's cell-attendant related that Fr. Nektary himself always wanted to know a person's needs before he would give him money. "He didn't like to give in vain, but if he gave, he would be generous—he'd give away a pair of boots, or even a cow or a horse." One of the Elder's spiritual daughters needed money, and she asked him for some. The Elder brought out a crumpled packet and said with a smile, "Here, count these rags."

"If someone robs you," the Elder counseled, "don't grieve, but consider it as though you've given alms, and the Lord will give you ten times as much in return."

"Do good to your neighbor," the Elder constantly reminded people. "Do something outward, and when it's done with diligence, it will turn out to be inward as well. But once having done good, don't become proud, but thank God: 'By Thy blessing, O Lord, have I accomplished this.' Remember the precept, *Without Me ye can do nothing* (John 15:5).

Each person that came to Fr. Nektary could sense the power of his love, about which he himself once said: "My child!

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* From the penitential prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian, used during Great Lent.—Ed.

We love with a love that never changes. Your love is the love of one day—ours is the same today and for a thousand years."

4. ON OBEDIENCE

The Elder spoke about obedience. He praised one of his spiritual children for accepting an obedience, and said that it was the most important acquisition she had made in her life. The highest and first virtue is obedience. He said that Christ came into the world for the sake of obedience, and that man's life on earth is obedience to God. "Without obedience a man is seized by impulse and, as it were, by a fever; but then there comes debility, cooling off, numbness, and he is unable to move any further. Obedience is at first difficult—always periods and commas, periods and commas—but afterwards it's all smoothed out, without any punctuation."

At times Elder Nektary taught understanding and attentiveness in obedience in graphic form: "Our forefathers were given a promise, which they awaited from Cain. He was the firstborn, but they gave preference to Abel, since he was meek, humble and obedient. But Cain was cruel, crude and did his own will. He was vexed that they gave Abel preference. The Lord said to him, 'Cain, sin lies at the threshold; take control of it or it will turn and destroy you.' But he did not try to delve into the words of the Lord. He looked at the threshold of his house and saw nothing there. But sin lay at the threshold of his heart. He went out and killed his brother. He renounced obedience to God and fell into obedience to sin. And how he was tormented thereafter! He was always running away from everything and was in fear of everything."

Thus did the Elder illustrate his teaching on discernment and heedfulness in obedience. He pointed out that one must not take spiritual instruction literally or superficially, limiting

oneself to the outward aspect; one must look not only at the threshold of the house, but at what is most important—at the threshold of one's heart.

In assigning a particular obedience, the Elder was very clear and precise in explaining exactly how it should be carried out, measuring it against one's strength. Once assigned, however, he expected it to be speedily and unhesitatingly fulfilled. Once he sent one of his spiritual daughters on an errand. She lingered in the anteroom talking to someone. The Elder came out and said, "Two minutes have passed and you're still here!"

The Elder instructed Metropolitan Benjamin (Fedchenkov): "Take this advice for your whole life—if your superiors or those senior to you order you to do something, then no matter how difficult or how lofty it seems, do not refuse it. For the sake of obedience, God will help."

The Elder's blessing always led to success, but one would never get away with disobedience. Nun Anna asked Fr. Nektary to allow her to bring her sister to Optina. She had gone blind and was living in an almshouse in Moscow. The Elder did not bless this; he only told one of his spiritual daughters to visit her, to give her a package from Mother Anna, and to request Fr. Sergius Mechev to commune the sick woman.

Later, in Optina, the Elder related: "You see, I had blessed her to enter a monastery, but she didn't obey and now she's gone blind." Then he turned to Mother Anna and added, "She will soon die, but before her death she'll regain her sight and will live out her last days quite well, and she'll be buried in the very best way." In fact, that is how it happened; she died that same year.

The monastery canonarch Peter always dreamt of podvigs, and begged Fr. Nektary to bless him to go off into the woods and live out there somewhere in the hollow of a tree. The Elder did not bless him, but he went just the same. He settled himself

in a hollow, but after a week the forest rangers arrested him. "Fr. Nektary laughed so hard then," recalled Lydia Vasilievna Zashchuk, a Petersburg journalist.

Another instance of the results of disobedience is taken from the recollections of E. M. Kosareva:

"In 1965 I was working in the dining hall of P.T.U. 29,* which was set up on the grounds of Optina Monastery. A cleaning lady, Maria Belyakovich, worked with us and related the following:

"In 1915 she, together with her fiance, came to Optina to Elder Nektary to receive a blessing for her marriage, and she brought her wedding icons and towel.**

"When they went in to see the Elder he said that it was not the will of God that they marry. Then she began to weep and confessed that she was already pregnant and there was no other path for her, but the Elder said to her, 'Unfold the wedding towel.' She unfolded it and to her horror saw that it was half black. 'There, you see?' said the Elder, 'Your life with him will only reach the halfway point—he will die first. And you'll have five children. But this is not your husband.'

"She told me, 'My husband and I didn't believe him and decided to do what we wanted. We were married and lived together. We really did have five children, and when the fifth child was a month and a half old our horse brought my dead husband home in the cart. I grieved—there was a famine; how could I be left with children, and what is more, with young ones? I wanted to poison the children and drown myself. At night the Elder appeared to me in a dream and said, "Don't

* Optina Monastery was turned into a lumber-cutting cooperative after its closure.—Ed.

** Icons with which parents bless their children for marriage. They are wrapped in a decorative towel for protection. This towel is later draped above the icons in the icon corner of the couple's new home.

despair, everything will be all right. Don't get married again; pray to God and you'll raise your children." That's what happened—all my children made their way in the world. Two sons are soldiers, and my daughters are married and living well.'"

Fr. Nektary himself, not only in his youth, but even as an Elder was always an example of humility and obedience. In the last years of his life at Optina he was ill, and moved about with difficulty. When he was advised to use a cane, he replied, "I don't yet have a blessing from my spiritual father for that." Even something so insignificant he did not dare to decide on his own, without a blessing. To the end of his days he strictly saw to it that people fulfilled their obediences, and he fulfilled his own.

Once, in Kholmishche, on a sunny autumn day, Andrei Efimovich, the owner of the house in which the Elder lived, and the nun Elena were chopping cabbages. Andrei Efimovich said, "You should call Batiushka; let him come out for a breath of air." Mother Elena ran off and called him, "Batiushka, come out here for some fresh air." "No, no," he answered, "I'll never make it." Then he came out on the porch and sat down. He had no strength to go any further. "Well, then!" he laughed, "though poorly, I fulfilled the obedience anyway."

5. ON LEARNING, ART AND LITERATURE

When he was still in reclusion, Elder Nektary's spiritual preceptors blessed him, after ten years of exclusive study of spiritual literature, to read secular authors and to study the secular sciences, obviously with the aim that he acquire that knowledge which would enable him to help lead the restless souls of the groping intelligentsia to salvation. He studied science, mathematics, history, geography and classical literature, both Russian and foreign. He spoke to his visitors about

Pushkin and Shakespeare, Milton and Krilov, Spengler and Hegart, Blok, Dante, Gogol, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. In his only hour of rest after dinner he would ask to have read aloud Pushkin or some fairy tales—either Russian or the Brothers Grimm. To the last days of his life the Elder asked people to bring him books and was interested in the direction of modern art. He likewise questioned people about the development of education in the new [soviet] times. He studied languages—Latin and French. He could quote in Latin and spoke French with ease (having become acquainted with a Frenchman who had converted to Orthodoxy in Optina, Count Alexandre DuShell).

Though he had only graduated from the village parish school, he could easily address writers and scholars. The writer Constantine Leontiev (in monasticism Fr. Clement) would read him his works and take counsel from him. He conversed with and took painting lessons from the artist Dimitry Mikhailovich Bolotov (who later became a monk with the name Daniel). Bolotov, having graduated from the St. Petersburg Academy of Art together with Repin and Vasnetsov, founded an icon-painting studio in Optina in which he taught according to the methods of the Academy. Fr. Nektary never lost his interest in art. At the same time he taught that all who yearn for true knowledge must ask God's help through prayer. He would often say, "I snuggle up to learning."

It was characteristic of him to be interested in various aspects of life in general. Up until the last year of his life he acquainted himself with contemporary literature, asking to have news of books and inquiring about the state of education in the schools and colleges. He knew about everything that interested the intelligentsia. But all this knowledge was necessary for his service to God and to people. He recounted how once, before the revolution, some seminarians came to him

with their instructors and asked him for some words of advice. "My dear young men," he addressed them, "if you live and study in such a way that your intelligence will not spoil your morality, but rather that your morals will affect your intelligence, then you'll be successful in life."

Once, one of his spiritual daughters was sorrowfully talking to her friend in his reception room: "I don't know—perhaps education is altogether unnecessary and only brings harm. How can it be reconciled with Orthodoxy?" The Elder, coming out of his cell, rejoined, "One time a man came to me who simply couldn't believe that there had been a Flood. Then I told him how on very high mountains in the sand are found shells and other remains from the ocean floor, and how geology testifies to the Flood—and he came to believe. You see how necessary learning is sometimes."

Often Fr. Nektary would say how much respect he had for learning. Of history he would say: "It shows us how God rules through people and gives, as it were, moral lessons to the world." Speaking on mathematics, he liked to ask if perhaps a triangle was not equal to a circle, and often gave the example from the Holy Fathers: "God is the center of the circle and people are the radii. In drawing closer to the center they become closer to one another." Concerning outward activity he would say: "The outward side belongs to you, but inner activity is conducted by the grace of God. Therefore, you must act; you yourself must conduct outward activity, and when all of this is in good order, then the inner side will be cultivated."

Once, the Elder said, "God not only allows, but requires of a man that he grow in knowledge. In God's creation there is no end; everything is moving. Even the angels do not remain in one rank but go from one step to another, receiving new revelations. Even if a man were to study for a hundred years he would advance to still newer and newer discoveries.... And you should

work. While working, years fly by imperceptibly." At this moment his face was unusually bright, so that it was difficult to look at him.

At another time he said, "Once a prophet had a vision of God—not in a circle of light, but in a triangle. This was a sign that man cannot approach and experience the impenetrable depth of the mystery of God. To man is given only to experience that which surrounds the Divinity; but if he makes bold to penetrate beyond these limits, he will perish from the sharp corners of the triangle."

Two of his disciples were once complaining about the peasants, that they were having a very hard time with them. The Elder said, "You probably speak to them in foreign languages. With them you have to speak Russian. Russian philology is a whole science." One disciple said bitterly, "Russian culture is not dear to you." He replied, "We have renounced not only culture, but even our own selves; nevertheless, Russian culture is dear to us. But if there is no life, then neither can there be culture."

Elder Nektary also spoke about art and literature: "One may occupy oneself with art just as with any work, such as cabinet-making or herding cows. But everything must be done before God's eyes. There is great art and there is lesser art. One can define the lesser as follows: there exist sound and light. An artist is someone who is sensitive to these sounds and lights which others are unable to perceive. He takes them and puts them on canvas and on paper. They become colors, notes and words. It's as though the sounds and lights have dissolved. From light there remains color. A book or a painting—these are the tombs of light and sound. A reader or viewer comes and, if he is able to creatively apprehend or read, a 'resurrection' of meaning takes place. And then the circle of art is completed. Light flashes in the soul of the viewer or reader, and his hearing

becomes awakened to sound. For this reason an artist or poet has no particular cause for pride. He's only doing his share of the work. In vain do they suppose themselves to be the creators of their works. There is one Creator, and men only dissolve the words and images of the Creator and then revive them by the power of the spirit given by Him.

"Thus it is with lesser art. But there is also a great art; there is the word, which gives life and takes it away (the Psalms of David, for instance); but the way to this art lies in the personal struggle of the artist. This is the path of podvig, and only one out of many thousands attains the goal.

"All the poetic verses in the world are not worth one line of Holy Scripture. Pushkin was one of the most learned men in Russia and yet he couldn't run his own life!"

He spoke of the need for writers to consider every word: "Before beginning to write, dip the pen into the inkwell seven times."

Recognizing that the theater was a means of popular education, and counselling actors to observe moderation in their acting, he once refused a blessing to a girl who was dreaming of going on stage. When asked why, he replied, "She will not overcome temptation and will become corrupted. Here strength is necessary. Modesty in our day is a great virtue. This is nothing less than purity. And to preserve purity (and among your intelligentsia this is easiest thing to lose) is to preserve all."

The Elder often spoke of painting. It was particularly close to him. To the end of his days in Optina he himself painted icons, and the last year that he was in the Skete he made a sketch for an icon of the Annunciation.

"There is no longer any great art," he once said. "Earlier, the artist would prepare himself for a particular painting, both in soul and outwardly. Before sitting down to work he would prepare everything—the brush and the paints. And he wouldn't

spend just a few days on the painting, but years, and sometimes even an entire lifetime, like Ivanov with his 'Appearance of Christ to the People.' And so great masterpieces were created. But now—he sits down to paint without the appropriate brushes, or he has to go get some paints; it disrupts his work. He doesn't even get his materials together. And he paints everything hurriedly, without thinking it through, without feeling every stroke...."

The Elder desired very much that someone paint the Nativity of Christ. "The world must remember this event. After all, it only happened once!" He explained how this painting should look: "The Magi—these are wise men and kings. The first, the youngest of the Magi, has seen a wondrous star. He has gone to inform the other two kings. They take counsel and decide to go to worship the newborn Christ. The star had appeared when the Mother of God entered Bethlehem with Joseph. And the Magi went. They walked across the desert and the star went before them. This star was special and had appeared, not in the vault of heaven, but in the air, like the moon in magnitude. At night the star illuminated the way directly before the Magi, and they walked along this illuminated path. When they came to Herod the star disappeared. When they left the city and went to Bethlehem, the star again went before them. It stopped before the cave in which the Savior lay. The shepherds in short robes, torn at the edges, stand with their faces to the light, their backs to the viewer. The light is not white, but slightly golden, without a hint of shadow, and not in rays or sheaves, but in uninterrupted brightness. Only in the far corners of the painting is there a faint twilight to indicate that it is night. The light comes from the figures of the angels who are so fine as to be almost imperceptible, and so that it will be quite evident that this was an unearthly, heavenly beauty—so that it will be altogether otherworldly!" he added with special emphasis. And he noted,

"When you paint angels, the light must not fall upon them; rather it must emanate from them."

He asked one girl, "Why on that night did the shepherds see angels? Because they were keeping vigil through the night."

According to notes of one of his spiritual daughters, "The Elder once spoke about the Light of Mount Tabor: 'This is such a light, that when it manifests, everything in the room is filled with it. It's radiant behind the mirror and under the couch (at this point he pointed to the mirror and the couch), and each crack in the table is illumined from within. There are no shadows in this Light; where there should be a shadow, there is a softening of the Light. Now the time has come for the world to find out about this Light.'

"Earlier, the Elder had blessed Leo (Bruni) to paint an icon of the Transfiguration to be sent to Germany, saying, 'Your icon will at first have an effect on the mind, and then on the heart.' Leo painted a wonderful icon, but the effect of the radiance of this white light was achieved by the use of some black, knotty trees in the foreground. Seeing them the Elder ordered him to erase them, as nothing must darken such a radiant manifestation. And Leo, weeping, erased them. The Elder did not explain then, either why he had ordered him to erase the trees, or what the Light of Tabor should be like. Only now, after three years, did he begin to speak about this.

"He spoke to us about the beauty that is invisible to physical sight, and how an angel once appeared under the guise of a destitute old man. The Elder's face was so bright and beautiful during these talks that we did not dare look at him. It seemed as though at any moment that wondrous Light might flash forth."

The Elder explained the symbolic meaning of the pelican and the phoenix: "The pelican feeds its young with its own blood—this is symbolic of Divine benevolence. The phoenix, sensing its approaching death, collects small twigs and branches

into a pile and sits down upon it. The heat of its body becomes so great that a bonfire ignites, and the phoenix burns in this purifying fire. Then, having become purified by the fire, it is reborn from the ashes, young and beautiful."

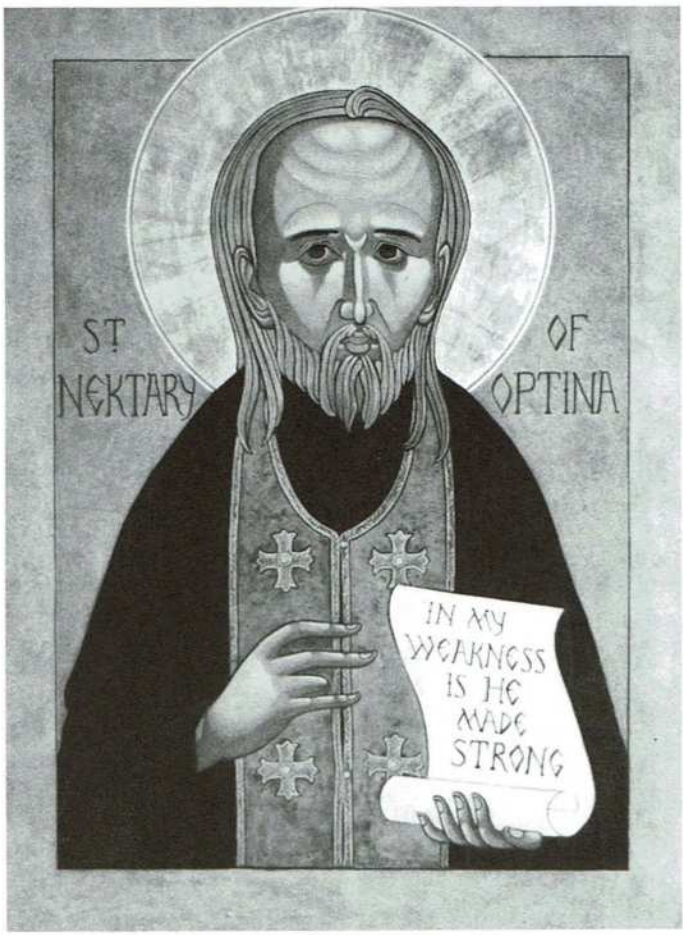
Elder Nektary once spoke about this cleansing fire in a commentary on the novel *She* by the English writer, Haggard.

This legend tells the story of an enchantress who lived for several thousand years, preserving her youth and beauty because she had plunged into a flaming fountain of life hidden in a mountain cave. Having fallen in love with a mortal youth, she wanted to give him the same everlasting beauty and immortality. When he was frightened by the wave of flames, she boldly entered it herself a second time to demonstrate that the flames were harmless, but she was instantly punished by being turned into a worn out old woman and dying.

The Elder gave a detailed account of the hidden and unattainable cave from which would periodically come forth a thunderclap, and then a great crash; then an unusual light would burst forth, and whoever would enter into this light would receive youth and beauty. "To Haggard was given the opportunity to reveal a part of the knowledge of this light to the world," he stated. His listeners were perplexed, and in the evening they asked one another about the meaning behind his teaching. In the morning, when they came to the Elder for a blessing, he met them with the words, "The general meaning: 'O Lord!'—there is thunder; 'Jesus Christ'—there's a crash; 'Son of God'—the light bursts forth; 'have mercy on me, a sinner'—the soul, if it so desires (here is total freedom), is allowed to step into this light and be renewed. But the soul may become aged in a week, sometimes in one day. It happens that the light itself comes to a man. St. Mary of Egypt described this to St Zosima. She was lying in the sand like a corpse in the desert, and a quiet, unearthly light appeared to her."

In the evening of the same day the Elder said, "A man belongs to two worlds—the visible and the invisible. Man is made up of a physical body, that of the soul, and that of the spirit or intellect. The body is given to him for convenience, as a dwelling for the spirit, so that it might function in the visible world. The visible world is reflected in the invisible world, and vice versa. And the same cave described by the writer exists in the heart of man, but it is not given to every man to descend into this cave. There are some people who never enter it, for it's surrounded by all kinds of dangers and precipices. The sound of thunder frightens the unclean spirits, and sometimes the soul itself. Crash!—the appearance of the Savior, as though the ordinary world has burst. And when the light sparks, the soul is allowed to enter it—not once, but even many times; and it receives youth, beauty and immortality. 'She,' the heroine of Haggard's novel, having irreverently entered a second time just to show that the fire wasn't dangerous, lost these gifts; this fire does indeed burn."

Elder Anatole (Potapov) of Optina.



Icon of Elder Nektary painted by an American nun, and located in the chapel dedicated to the Saint in San Francicso.

4

Exile

(1923-1927)

After the revolution, with the conclusion of the civil war the new God-fighting authority attacked Christ's Church with all its satanic malice. Orthodox people were rooted out and the image of Christ was driven out of the souls of the new generation. During these years lies, blasphemy, arrests and banishments became the day-to-day reality.

In May of 1922 there arose a church schism: renovationism—the so-called "Living Church," which attempted to unite Christianity with marxism. Members of the "Living Church," together with the Cheka, warred against the "counter-revolution." They seized churches and destroyed monasteries.

Concerning the "Living Church" Elder Nektary stated his opinion resolutely: "There is no grace there. By rebelling against the lawful Patriarch, Tikhon, the bishops and priests of the 'Living Church' have deprived themselves of grace and have lost, according to canonical ruling, their hierarchical office. Because of this, the Liturgy performed by them is a blasphemy." The Elder forbade his spiritual children to enter the renovationist churches. If there were wonderworking icons in such churches—the Iveron Mother of God, for example—he told them that, entering the churches, they should go straight to the icon and neither by thought nor by movement should they participate in the services being celebrated there. Candles

to be placed before the icons were to be brought from home or from an Orthodox church. But at the same time he said that if the renovationists repented, they were to be received into communion with the Church.

During talks with the Elder about the grave situation of the Church, he was asked how to pray about this. He uttered the following prayer: "For the overthrow of those who have risen up against us, that the holy Churches of God that are in peril be set free, with their defenders and all the faithful, let us pray to the Lord!"

The events of 1922-23 were the beginning of the most terrible pages in the history of the Russian Church. The Patriarch of All Russia, Tikhon, was arrested. Metropolitan Benjamin of Petrograd was shot. There were mass arrests and shootings of clergy. By the end of 1923 the number of bishops, priests and monks imprisoned on Solovki* exceeded two thousand.

Monasteries were closed. The monks and nuns from those monasteries came to the Elder. The young nun Thaisia from the Kashirsky Monastery came as well. "What will happen to us?" she asked. "Will they scatter us or not?" "Yes, my dear, they'll scatter us," replied Fr. Nektary. "The monasteries are now in great danger. Even our Optina is designated to be closed." And when she asked him where to go when they were dispersed, he advised her, "Come to us for good."

Sitting in the Elder's reception room for close to three hours, doing the Jesus Prayer in accordance with his blessing, nun Thaisia saw how the Elder was praying for her in his cell. Having prayed, he came up to her and blessed her with five plums, which prophetically foretold to her that she had five months to live in Optina. At the end of the fifth month she

* The ancient Solovki Monastery, located on an island in the White Sea, became a concentration camp, the main function of which was the extermination of bishops, other clergy, and monastics.—Ed.

peacefully reposed. The Elder's prayer delivered her from prison, exile and the other misfortunes which would have been her inescapable lot.

After the closing of the Monastery in Shamordino many of the sisters settled near Optina. Elder Nektary said, "Twelve virgins live with us."

In 1920 the skete Superior, Abbot Theodosius, reposed and Elder Nektary was named to that post. Soon, in April of that same year, following the example set by his predecessors, the Optina Elders, Fr. Nektary was tonsured into the schema. This was in accordance with the formal request of the acting Superior of the Monastery, Archimandrite Isaac, to which His Eminence, Bishop Theophan of Kaluga responded, "To be carried out."

On July 30, 1922, Elder Anatole (Potapov) departed peacefully to the Lord. In one of her letters nun Nektaria said concerning Elder Anatole: "He suffered much."*

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* We present here an excerpt from the Life of Elder Sebastian, one of Elder Nektary's cell-attendants. He is speaking here to his biographer, not long before his own repose: "... I was just lying here remembering how the Elders died in Optina. Fr. Joseph was sick for a very long time, but Fr. Anatole 'the Younger' was never sick for even one minute. He died in a miraculous way; this was a mystery ... quite wondrous. By his great humility he was closer in spirit than anyone to my Elder Nektary. After the revolution two of the Elders died and were buried in the Optina cemetery. Fr. Theodosius, the Skete Superior, died in 1920 when everything in Optina was still like it was in the old days—no one had touched anything or persecuted anyone. But as the civil war ended in 1921, everything changed, and there was a great deal of persecution, particularly in 1922. There were searches and many arrests, and then it was Elder Anatole's turn. They came to him on July 29, conducted a lengthy search, cut his hair and shaved him. He bore it all patiently. Then they said, 'Well, get ready to go.' He begged them to let him postpone his departure until morning. They agreed, and told his cell-attendant to get him ready to leave early in the morning. They gave him a strict warning about this and left. Elder Anatole began to pray.

From then on a whole flood of pilgrims streamed to the cell of Elder Nektary. With particular frequency his visitors posed questions to the Elder concerning how to live in the new era of militant atheism. They asked if it were possible to argue with acquaintances about religion. He did not permit this, warning that a wound could be inflicted in their heart, from which it would be very difficult to be delivered. He said that it would be all right to have good mundane contact even with unbelievers, but that there could be no prayerful contact with them. One must not argue with them about religion so as not to defile the name of God in an argument.

Fr. Nektary not only received dozens of people in his "hut," but also answered a multitude of letters. The Elder strengthened all who turned to him, gave them advice and protected them by his prayers from the evil and misfortune which had become unavoidable for all in that dreadful time.

All the troubles of the revolution and civil war—losses, sickness and hunger, which occurred in almost every family—all the tears and groans were poured out daily to the Elder of Optina. It was Divine grace alone that helped Fr. Nektary to bear this terrible burden. By the Elder's holy prayers, people

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His cell-attendant waited for two hours—the Elder was praying the whole time—and then he went in to him and said, 'Well, Batiushka, let's get ready.' But Fr. Anatole answered, 'Go away, don't bother me.' He left. He came in after another two hours and begged, 'Batiushka, let's get ready.' And he responded, 'What are you getting so upset about? I'm not going anywhere with them. Go away.' He left again and the third time he came in, Fr. Anatole was lying on his cot with his hands folded on his chest—dead. Well, the cell-attendant called the necessary people and they vested the Elder, placed him on the table, lit the candles and began to read the Psalter and the Gospel. Soon they came for him. They said, 'Are you ready, Elder?' The cell-attendant answered, 'He's ready, come in.' They entered, and there he was, lying dead on the table. Well, they went away—of course, probably quite amazed—and Fr. Anatole was the last one buried in the Optina cemetery, next to Elder Macarius.

Elder Sebastian of Optina in Karaganda near the end of his life.

who had lost the meaning of life came out of his cell comforted, although he promised no one that these painful misfortunes would soon come to an end. On the contrary—he warned that it was needful to prepare for more cruel trials and instructed people concerning the absolute necessity for patience and prayer. When nun Hilaria asked him if it would be better in the future, he banged three times on the table and said that it would be worse, it would be even worse; it would be absolutely terrible. And he hung his head low. "How shall we live?" they asked him. "Like a little mouse under a broom," replied the Elder.

One woman who visited Optina in the 1920's said that it was not by chance that an icon of Christ's Resurrection was set on the gates of the Monastery. After having been with the Elder, people would be spiritually resurrected. They would sense that the Lord Himself was acting and speaking through the Elder. When people who were hungry and close to despair turned personally or through others to Fr. Nektary, the Lord would always help them through his prayers.

With each year the situation in the country and in the life of the people became ever more difficult and devastating, and the podvig of eldership more distressing. Due to the unceasing tears which the Elder poured forth in prayer in his "hut" before the Lord and the Theotokos, his eyes became inflamed. When Fr. Nektary went out to receive people there was always a handkerchief in his hand with which he dabbed his eyes. In the 1920's he appeared to many in dreams with a handkerchief in his hand, weeping.

At the time when people needed his prayerful help the most, Elder Nektary began to be overcome with the thought of leaving eldership to become a pilgrim. But all the Optina Elders appeared to him in a vision and said, "If you wish to be with us, don't abandon your spiritual children." And he did not abandon

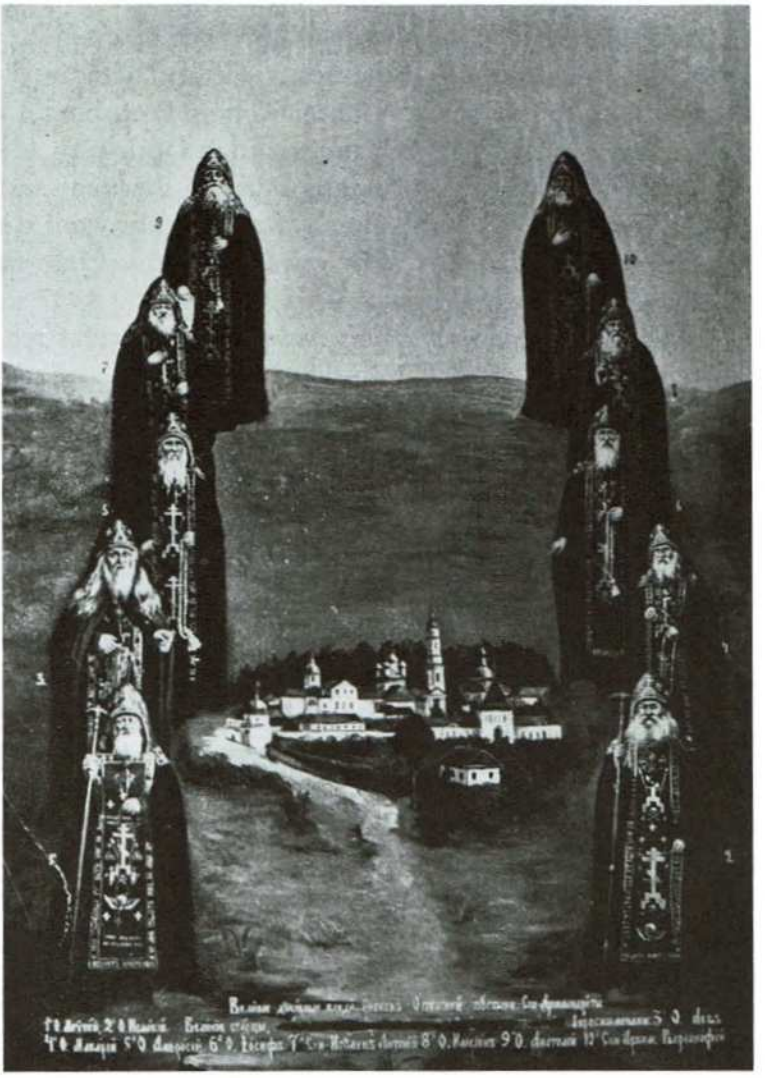
them. He continued to pray for the suffering nation and begged the Lord to preserve in them faith and strength.

During this difficult time the creative element of the intelligentsia also came to Optina. A journalist from Petersburg, Lydia Vasilievna Zashchuk, came and settled in Optina. So as to protect the Monastery she created a museum there and took charge of it. (At the Elder's blessing N. Pavolvich also worked in this museum for two years.) She was later tonsured into the schema with the name Augusta. On December 26, 1937 she was counted worthy of a martyr's crown together with Archimandrite Isaac.

For the confiscation of the library Nicholas Iosifovich Conrad (later an Orientalist academician) was sent to the Monastery. Talks with the Elder brought him as well to Orthodoxy. The artist Leo Alexandrovich Bruni lived in Optina for a long time with his family. These and several other of the Elder's spiritual children comprised the nucleus of a "cultural colony," so traditional for Optina. N. Pavlovich recalled, "We considered ourselves to be the continuers of the work of the intelligentsia that lived during the time of Elder Macarius (Kireyevsky and the Slavophiles)."

Over the course of several years after the revolution, Optina Monastery courageously endured the burdens that fell to its lot, but the days of the holy Monastery were numbered. The lands owned by the Monastery were gradually subjected to confiscation. When they were deprived of their last means of existence the remaining able-bodied monks formed an agricultural cooperative, continuing at the same time to celebrate the services in the Monastery.

On Palm Sunday in 1923 the Monastery was closed. Searches and arrests had taken place first in Shamordino and then, two weeks later, in Optina. Komsomol members with rifles were posted by the cells of the monks that had still not



Geneology—a century of Optina Elders.
A popular general portrait which hung in Fr. Adrian's room.

deserted the Monastery. They arrested Archimandrite Isaac, Fr. Panteleimon the treasurer, and Bishop Micah with his cell-attendants. They came for Elder Nektary as well. Those who came were in a belligerent frame of mind, thinking that the Elder would accuse and oppose them. But he was quiet and calm. He was standing there, blinking an electric light. The young people went from anger to a good-natured, merry mood.

Then they led Elder Nektary to the monastery bread bakery, which had been turned into a prison. He walked along the path, which was covered with March ice, and fell. The room in which they placed him was partitioned off, but not all the way up to the top, and armed guards were sitting in the other half and smoking. The Elder gasped for breath from the smoke. On Passion Thursday, just as they were ringing the bells for the Twelve Passion Gospels, they took him to the prison in Kozelsk.

According to the Elder's cell-attendant, Peter, "During his first interrogation, Batiushka was silent. Then they said to him, 'You're irritating us by your silence.' And he said, 'But the Lord Jesus Christ was also silent when they interrogated Him.'" Peter also said that the monks asked Elder Nektary, "How should we answer at the interrogations when they ask us whether we are monks or not?" And the Elder replied, "Answer that you are a monk. Monasticism is a second Baptism—the word (monk) is only one word, but the meaning therein is great. To renounce monasticism is to renounce your second Baptism, and that means to renounce Christ as well."

Mother Nektaria's notes concerning the moment of his arrest have been preserved: "The Elder had never allowed anyone into his cell, so that the cell-attendants did not know what was in there. When they came to take inventory of his possessions, even the cell-attendants were going in for the first time. And what did they see? Children's toys! Puppets, balls, lanterns and

small baskets! Those who were taking inventory asked, 'What are these children's toys for?' And he replied, 'I, myself, am like a child.' They found church wine and canned foods, and he said to them, 'Drink up and eat.' And they drank all the wine.... When he rode out of the Monastery (on a sleigh) his last words were, 'Give me a hand,'—so that they would help him up into the sleigh. He sat down, blessed the road ahead, and left. We were there then but we didn't see him."

Due to his eye ailment Fr. Nektary was transferred from the prison to the hospital, but sentries were posted.... The soviets, without a trial, sentenced the Elder to be shot. But N. Pavlovich, who had for a short time been the secretary of the extracurricular department of the Narkompros (People's Commissariat of Education) decided to address Krupskaya* with a complaint against the local Cheka. "They've grabbed my grandfather-monk and put him in jail," she wrote in a memorandum. Krupskaya decided to help her former co-worker and phoned Dzerzhinsky's first deputy, Beloborodov,** who sent a telegram to Kozelsk ordering that the Elder be freed. That night Pavlovich returned to Kozelsk and came to the local Cheka. The chekists stood at attention before her and handed the Elder over to her.***

This all took place during Bright Week. The Elder was set free on April 17. Pavlovich was told to take him further from Optina. With the Elder's blessing she took him to a farm in

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* Lenin's wife.—Ed.

** Dzerzhinsky was a close associate of Lenin's and the founder of the notorious Cheka, the forerunner of the KGB. Beloborodov, another high-ranking bolshevik, was one of the men directly guilty of the murder of Tsar-martyr Nicholas II and his family.—Ed.

***It is interesting that Pavlovich herself, in old age, began to look like Krupskaya—small, short and nearsighted, wearing thick glasses. She had a unique relationship with Lenin's wife. "Why don't you join the Komsomol?" she sternly asked Pavlovich. "I can't." "Why can't you?" "I'm a believer." "Ah, a believer; well, all right then."

Plokhino, not far from Kozelsk, to his spiritual son Basil Petrovich Osin.

To riassaphore-monk Fr. James (subsequently Fr. George) he said, "You should have three fears: the first is to fear the renunciation of monasticism; the second is to fear your superiors; the third is to fear your youth. Which must you fear the most? I command you to hold above all to monasticism. Even if they point a revolver at you, don't renounce monasticism. Remember how we were in prison and didn't renounce it. But such a trial might happen to you again."

The Skete in which Elder Nektary had spent fifty years was deserted. An announcement was hung over the holy gates forbidding outsiders from entering without the permission of the manager of the museum. A letter was sent to Moscow concerning accommodations for Muscovites desiring to take up summer residence there.

A contemporary of these events wrote in his memoirs: "I'd like to relate to you one episode of the desecration of the holy things of Optina. After the Monastery had already been closed my mother and I, on the way to see Fr. Nektary in Kholmishche, often stopped in at Optina, which had been turned into a lumber-cutting cooperative, while the Skete had become a home for vacationers. They were pitilessly cutting down the magnificent Optina pine forest; the saws were screeching and one could hear the cursing of the workers. There wasn't a single monk. It was sad and painful to see the present, recalling the spiritual flowering of Optina in the past."

There is testimony that before the revolution someone had advised the Archimandrite to cut down the ancient pines that grew between the Monastery and the Skete. Fr. Nektary resolutely opposed this: "A precept was laid down by our great Elders never to touch the forest between the Skete and the Monastery. I give no permission for a bush to be cut, let

alone the ancient trees." Regarding the precepts of the great Elders with reverence, Fr. Nektary warned that for disobeying the Elders a serious punishment was coming. He often repeated the prophetic words of Fr. Barsanuphius: "The decline and decay of the Monastery will begin with forgetfulness of our founders and ascetics...."

On the farm in Plokhino the Elder occasionally took walks through the fields. He went about in a brown podrasnik and a wide-brimmed straw hat that had previously belonged to St. John of Kronstadt. He walked with short, quiet, wobbling steps. He strolled through the garden and in the yard; everything interested him—even the wells and machinery, and he blessed them.

While on the farm Fr. Nektary once said to N. Pavlovich, "Let's go to Japan; they've preserved Orthodoxy there...."

According to the recollections of Basil Petrovich, Fr. Nektary especially loved and always blessed their worker, the old woman Martha.

> She was altogether destitute. Her relatives were such that they had chased her from home, cursed her and even beaten her. She came to live with us and worked like a bought slave, and she barely made it to church once a year to receive Communion or to attend Paschal services.
>
> How the Lord consoled her before her death! I saw that she was about to die and gave orders to harness the horses and take her to the village to receive Holy Communion.
>
> Usually the Elder communed our sick ones in the cabin, but this time he ordered the church to be opened for Martha. When she returned home her face was so radiant: "Oh, Vasiliushka, how the Lord consoled me. Batiushka communed me right in front of the altar." Martha lay on a bench; she no longer had strength to walk.... My wife said, "She's going to die here, and we'll be afraid of her. Take her to her relatives or

to the hospital." I looked, and there were tears in Martha's eyes.

I said, "Don't be afraid, my little dove, I'm not going to take you anywhere. Lie there and recover."

She remained with us. Only I went in to see her, and once I saw that she had lowered her foot to the floor, as if she wanted to get up; she had arched her back and her head was thrown back. I ran over and supported her, but Martha stretched and died right then, as if falling asleep. Such a blessed end! I immediately sent for her relatives and for a nun to read the Psalter. We washed her and laid her out; she lay there as if alive, and no one felt any fear of her. I later asked Fr. Nektary, "Why are we not afraid of her, but are afraid of other dead people?" And he said, "There's no fear near the righteous. Here the holy angels are by the body and the soul senses it and is not afraid. But if the person had been sinful, then evil spirits are by the body, and the soul cannot separate itself from the body right away. And so it sees its enemies and begins to blaze. That's where our fear comes from."

Martha was very kind. Whatever was given her, she would give away. I once made her a present of a sheepskin coat. She wore it to Liturgy but on the next day she was again walking about poorly clad. "Where's your coat?" I asked.

"I have a poor nephew," she replied, "he needs it more." Then I re-sewed something old for her. Again she wasn't wearing it. She gave it to some girl.

My wife got mad: "What are you giving everything away for, Martha? You won't have enough for yourself. Remember how they beat you and cursed you."

But she laughed:"They're just kids. They need it more."

She also gave her small shawl to someone, tied a rag around her head, and went about all dirty.

I said: "It's disgusting even to eat from her hands. Sew her some burlap aprons." Well, at least she wore the aprons, but the rag was still on her head, as before.

She also had great pity on animals. When the ewes gave birth she wept from pity and carried the lambs in her hands.

She had no time to converse with Fr. Nektary when he lived with us; she consoled herself with his blessing.... Once the Elder went out for a stroll while Martha was carrying linens out to the river. She rushed to support the Elder by the elbow, but she herself fell. He helped her up, laughed and made the sign of the Cross over her: "There, you see—you wanted to hold me up and you even fell yourself." And they continued on together, both oldsters—Fr. Nektary in his straw hat and Martha beside him supporting him by the elbow, the basket of linens on her shoulder....

Soon the authorities demanded that the Elder leave the Kaluga region. Since the farm was one and a half miles from the border of the province, he had to move. N. Pavlovich moved him further away, to the village of Kholmishche in the Briansk region, to Basil Petrovich's brother-in-law, Andrei Efimovich Denezhkin.

Before their departure, Fr. Nektary discussed the fate of Optina with Pavlovich and Archimandrite Isaac (the last Superior of Optina, who was martyred in exile the day after Christ's Nativity in 1937). The Elder blessed Pavlovich to always take care of Optina and to do eveything possible for its preservation.* They laid a difficult task on Pavlovich: to convince the local Cheka to preserve Optina—albeit without the Elder and the Archimandrite, whose fame had attracted throngs of worshipers. She again went to the Cheka. The chekists, frightened by the previous telegram from Moscow, were fairly amenable, but demanded in exchange some rugs from the rooms of the Superior,

* Many years later, during services in the Moscow church of the Holy Prophet Elijah, of which Nadezhda Pavlovich was a parishioner, the Pillars of Optina appeared to her as they had to the Elder. They blessed her to make efforts for the restoration of Optina, an obedience which she fulfilled with honor.

gifts from notable pilgrims. In this way the remaining monks were given the possibility of living within the walls of Optina and attending the still-functioning churches. But Optina was already in its death agony—the next year the churches were closed and the monks were expelled for good.

Denezhkin's large and sound house in Kholmishche stood on a hillock. They set aside half of the house for the Elder, two large rooms—sleeping quarters and a reception room, plus a small front room.

During his initial period in Kholmishche the Elder, being overcome, rarely received people. He occasionally asked to be read the fifth volume of the *Philokalia.* But the Elder by no means lived peacefully and well all the time.

N. Pavlovich related the following about the difficulties endured by the Elder at the beginning of his exile:

> At that time, on the farm and in Kholmishche, the Elder was, for a time, in a terribly depressed state. On the farm he told me frankly, "Don't ask me about anything. I can't be an Elder now. You can see that I don't even know how to direct my own life now." And I served him like a daughter and a nurse, not asking about anything. Our day would go like this: I slept, along with Fyonya, in the same house as he, in the other half. We would go for a blessing in the morning, and I would remain and pour him some tea. Then I would take away the dishes and the Elder would begin to rearrange the lumps of sugar or would sit silently in a terribly sad state. Once I noticed that he had become nervous and was toying with little boxes, not in the usual way. I asked him what was wrong and took everything away so that he would stop. He said very quickly and plaintively, 'Do you think it's easy for me? In the Skete I had visitors and my garden was under my window and I labored there. But what is there for me to do now?" Then he wept and lamented, "I'm going to die of starvation." Later we would go to his room, where he slept, and I

would read aloud to him from the fifth volume of the *Philokalia,* or he would just talk with me. Often out of weakness I would cease reading and would only guard his sleep. Occasionally he would fall into utter faintheartedness and weep in my arms like a child, especially if visitors came. He didn't want to receive anyone, but I begged him to take pity on those who came.

I recall one terrible day. He flatly refused to see anyone. At last I said to him in despair, "Batiushka, after all, these people have come three hundred miles. If the shepherd falls into such faintheartedness, what can one expect from the sheep?" And so he received them, but ordered me not to leave. And then I saw something wondrous and terrifying—I had been speaking with a weeping, weak old man. And right before my eyes he straightened up and became majestic. The visitors entered. Before them was an Optina Elder. He spoke with power and authority. After fifteen or twenty minutes he dismissed them, and human frailty again returned to him.

Elder Ambrose also endured many afflictions before his death. He considered it to be retribution for the honors he had received during his life, but Elder Joseph said that it was the burden of the sins of others, which the saint had taken upon himself.

When N. Pavlovich began to have doubts as to whether she should leave the Elder there or to search for more favorable conditions, Fr. Nektary refused to leave: "God has brought me here." He later related that he had then had a second vision of the Optina Elders, who commanded him to remain there for good.

The difficulties of the road to Kholmishche did not stop people. An enormous number of people either came to see the Elder or turned to him in writing for advice and help—both simple folk and great hierarchs. The holy Patriarch Tikhon took counsel with the Elder through trustworthy persons. Not

one important church question was resolved without Elder Nektary's blessing. They knew that the Lord revealed His will through him. It is known that when St. Tikhon learned that the Elder did not bless the acceptance of the new-style calendar of church services, the All-holy Patriarch, hoping in the omnipotent help of God, resolutely rejected the innovation.

However, Elder Nektary did not cease to be in communion with those who continued to commemorate Metropolitan Sergius, among whom were many of the Optina monks, his spiritual children. He received a letter from one of the nuns of Shamordino—what attitude should one have towards Metropolitan Sergius? "My child, Mother Anna," replied her banished confessor and instructor, "I bless you to go to the church which I attended. Don't be upset that they commemorate Metropolitan Sergius there. Though he has sinned in much, he is still at the head of the Orthodox Church."

Fr. Nektary's position was truly that of an elder. He chose the middle, "royal" path that had been handed down by the Teachers of the Church. While he himself commemorated Metropolitan Sergius, he did not avoid contact with the "non-commemorators." In accordance with the word of the Lord, Who *sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust* (Matt. 5:45), the wise shepherd received both the one and the other. Understanding that this division arose not so much from Christian as from political considerations, he did not suffer the loss of joint prayers with the Optina fathers, one of whom was his confessor, and he received people from Kozelsk and Shamordino.

At the same time he also had spiritual children among the "non-commemorating" Christians from Maroseiko Street. To the secret adherents of the "Mechevians" belonged the clergy of the majority of the churches in Moscow, who, though they did not formally break with Metropolitan Sergius, did not in fact

commemorate him, as well as certain other bishops. Fr. Nikon (Belyaev), to whom Elder Nektary, in line of successsion, had passed on the authority of eldership that was given him at the council of the Optina fathers, remained in contact with the most zealous of the "non-commemorators," the head priest of the church of St. Nicholas on Maroseiko Street, Fr. Sergius Mechev.

Fr. Basil Evdokimov came to Kholmishche. He was twenty years old then. The youth had written a letter to Elder Anatole but the envelope was returned unopened, and marked "addressee deceased." He went personally to Kozelsk. Here he learned that Optina had been devastated. He received Holy Communion in the church of St. George, where many of the Optina monks were serving. The head priest, Fr. Macarius (Cheltsov), showed him the road to Kholmishche. And now the city-dweller, who had never walked such a distance, went on foot to see Fr. Nektary. He spent the night somewhere and was again on his way.

Having crossed the threshold of the Elder's cell, he was ready to confess, by his own admission, all his sins "from Adam on,"* but the Elder did not ask him anything, and only looked attentively at the pilgrim. "If you go along the road of the Church, happiness will overtake you; if you don't go along the road of the Church, misfortune will overtake you," he finally uttered. "To whom do you bless me to confess?" asked the shaken youth. "To Fr. Nikon or Fr. Dositheus."

Inasmuch as the first word of an elder is the most trustworthy, he sought out Fr. Nikon in Kozelsk and asked to confess to him all his sins "from Adam." Basil later became a subdeacon, sat out two sentences in the camps, and then exile in Tashkent, where he was ordained a priest. His spiritual father was then

* That is, he wanted to confess all his unconfessed sins, from the age of seven.—Ed.

Elder Nektary's disciple, Fr. Boris Kholchev, who ended his days in the capital of Uzbekistan.*

There came to the Elder Optina monks and Shamordino nuns, who were living in Kozelsk after the Monasteries had been closed. The Optina confessors came to him—Fr. Nikon (Belyaev) and Fr. Dositheus (Chuchuryukin), to whom Elder Nektary himself confessed. Clergy from other cities also visited the Elder.

Elder Nektary tirelessly bore his lofty spiritual service, though he was already physically feeble.

For the last year of his life (1927-28) Fr. Nektary was very weak and received almost no one. His strength was noticeably waning. In December of 1927 it was thought that the Elder was dying; however, there was a temporary improvement.

But in February of 1928 a hernia was discovered, and the doctor declared his condition to be dangerous. By the end of April of 1928 it became clear that the end was approaching.

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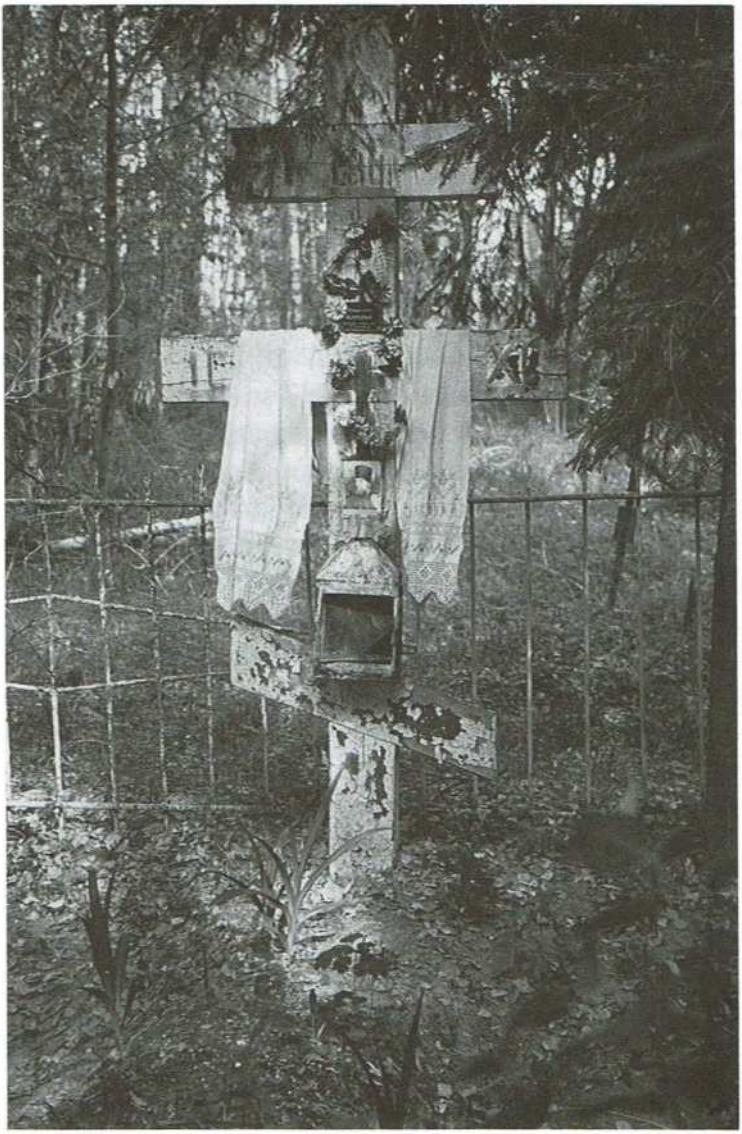
* Archpriest Basil Evdokimov departed to the Lord on December 5/18, 1990. On the eve, on the day of Great-martyr Barbara, the altar of the church on Maroseiko Street had been consecrated after many years of inactivity with regards to church services. Fr. Basil had taken a large share in the renewal of the parish of St. Nicholas. The day after the opening of the church he was dead. On December 6, the patronal feast day of the church, the day of St. Nicholas the God-pleaser, his body was placed in the Maroseiko Church and the Holy Scriptures were read over him for three full days. On the 8th his funeral was served and he was buried in the German cemetery, where all the Mechevs are buried.



The cross at the foot of Elder Nektary's grave.

5

Last Days and Righteous Repose

(†1928)

In February of 1928 N. Pavlovich came to see Fr. Nektary. She recalled her last meeting with him: "The Elder called me in. He was in a semi-recumbent position on the bed with a very bright face which had grown younger, with sparkling, suffering eyes. I was transfixed by a feeling of his sanctity. I saw that the Elder was making the sign of the Cross over me. He said, 'Nadenka, you see—I'm dying.' I became quite flustered at the directness of his words about death. He looked at me for a long time and said, 'You won't perish. You're sinful, but you have a true Christian spirit.' These were the very words he had spoken to me at my first confession with him in 1922.

"Then he looked at me: 'There's a cloud of demons hovering over you. Without fail, confess and receive Holy Communion.' I answered, 'I'd like to confess to you.' He smiled: 'I'm not abandoning you, but I have no strength now. Confess to another Orthodox priest. Just don't go to a "red church."' Then he began to weaken. He sat for a while longer with a very aloof and passionless expression on his face and ate dried bread. Then he lifted his head and said, 'Go now, and depart early in the morning.' He blessed me and said, 'Come to me at night before your departure.'

"I lay without sleep until three in the morning. At the stroke of three I went to the Elder's side of the house. From the darkness there came a voice: 'Nadenka, water!' On the ledge, about two feet from him was a teapot with water and an empty glass, but he had no strength. The Elder raised himself up slightly and lowered his feet from the bed. He was in a white bathrobe with a turned-down collar and his face was again young and fair. He began to speak distinctly, clearly and with a loud voice. I understood—now it was again an Elder that was speaking: 'I'm dying and I'm pleading to God for you. I've taken everything of yours upon myself, but there's one trial you'll have to endure yourself. You must again withstand the same temptation. If you do away with yourself, don't blame me!' And his voice became gentle: 'Nadenka! I beg you—hold on, endure. But when I'm dead and gone, remember what I've told you just now. When the temptation comes, just say, "Lord, have mercy!"'

"I looked at him and did not understand. 'Batiushka, what are you talking about—the past or the future?'

"He smiled: 'And the present.'

"'I'm afraid,' I said.

"'Don't be afraid. Just preserve the grace of Holy Communion and everything will be all right.' After a few questions about acquaintances the Elder said, 'I can't enter into your worldly affairs anymore. Remember that I'm a monk of the last degree.'*

"Then I saw that his face was becoming tired and his voice was weakening. 'What would you like me to send you?' I asked. 'I thank you. I don't need anything. Only some wine—port wine. I use it to keep my strength up.'

"Then he said quite sternly, 'Tell everyone that I forbid them to come to me!' There was a pause. With another, plaintive tone he said, 'Tell people that I beg them not to come. I become even sicker from it.' He grew pale before my eyes.

* That is, a schema-monk.—Ed.

'Spare me, I can't anymore.' His face became completely pale. Andrei Efimovich and I laid him gently down. He lay on his side and, barely noticeably, made the sign of the Cross over me. I bowed low to him and went out."

That which follows, concerning the final hours of Fr. Nektary's life, was taken down from the words of Fr. Adrian Rymarenko.

In April of 1928, on the 27th, Fr. Adrian received a postcard from Basil Petrovich Osin, saying that Fr. Nektary was indeed dying now. Fr. Adrian left at once and reached Kholmishche on April 29, despite the difficulties connected with the spring thaw.

He was met in the house by Sophia Alexandrovna Engelhardt, and by the owner of the house, Denezhkin, and his relative, Maria Efimovna. Although Fr. Nektary occasionally became conscious, he was now no longer able to speak.

During the evening meal, in the side of the house occupied by the landlord, they told Fr. Adrian about the progression of the illness and about the most recent events—how they had asked Fr. Nektary whom they should summon for his departure. They had suggested Fr. Valentin Sventitsky. The Elder categorically said "No." "Who then?" they continued to ask. "Perhaps Fr. Dositheus?"*

"No," he objected. "If you call Fr. Dositheus they'll arrest him in Kozelsk. You'll have to call Fr. Sergius Mechev."

They informed Fr. Sergius about this. He came, confessed and communed the Elder, and left in the morning of the day Fr. Adrian arrived. The latter did not manage to see Fr. Sergius.

* When Fr. Dositheus had learned that the Elder was dying, he longed to go to him. But the last time he had seen him, when Fr. Dositheus asked, "When can I come to you next?" Fr. Nektary said, "Come to me over dry land." He could not violate the Elder's word, and in great sorrow remained in Kozelsk, since there was water all around it.

At 8:30 in the evening Maria Efimovna hurriedly summoned Fr. Adrian to the sick man—"Batiushka! Quickly, quickly!" When Fr. Adrian entered, she locked the door with a key and allowed no one else in.

Fr. Nektary was covered with a mantia and lay half-turned towards the wall. There stood before his eyes an icon of St. Nicholas and an icon of his patron saint, St. Nektary, in a silver riza. On a small table beside the bed there lay a trebnik and an epitrachelion. In both rooms of that side of the house candles were burning. The Elder was breathing with difficulty. Maria Efimovna said sharply, "Read the Prayers for the Departure of the Soul!" Fr. Adrian put on the epitrachelion and began to read the prayers. He read slowly, glancing at him from time to time. It appeared that tears were flowing from the Elder's eyes. He was looking at the icon; he was obviously conscious. When the prayers were ended he was still breathing, but his breathing became slower and slower, with long intervals. Fr. Adrian read the prayer of absolution and, kneeling, covered the face of the dying man with the mantia. He continued to breathe for a long time after this—forty minutes, or perhaps even an hour.

"His breathing was very soft, with pauses," relates Fr. Adrian, but there came "a moment when I sensed that these were his last breaths, and I arose and placed the epitrachelion over his head. I could see his mouth and neck. After a space of complete calm, a certain movement was noticeable in his throat. A smile appeared on his lips. That was his last breath." During all this time Fr. Nektary was covered with the epitrachelion.

"When the Elder died I removed the epitrachelion from his head and closed his eyes, which were half-open. Maria Efimovna said to me with trepidation, 'Batiushka, how clairvoyant the Elder was! You know, he began to die in front of me and I wanted to remain entirely alone with him; but I remembered how, back in January, he said to me, "Manya, call Fr. Adrian!"

All that is left of the village of Kholmishche today.
Only seven houses are left of the original five hundred.

The remains of the Kholmishche church, where Elder Nektary occasionally served, and where his funeral was performed.

And when I explained that Fr. Adrian was not here, he replied categorically, "Call him! They've taken him away to the other side of the house!" I remembered this just now and began to tremble at the thought that I was violating the Elder's will and I called you in!'"

As soon as they opened the door of the room, an agent of the GPU appeared and confiscated Fr. Adrian's documents.

The local priest, Fr. Tikhon, was summoned. He and Fr. Adrian prepared the body to be vested.

The next day, early in the morning, Fr. Tikhon left to prepare for the Liturgy while Fr. Adrian remained to read the Gospel over Elder Nektary, which he read without interruption until eight o'clock Sunday evening, when the first groups of people began to arrive from Kozelsk, Moscow and Smolensk.

News of what had happened quickly spread throughout the district. The Elder's confessor, Fr. Dositheus, sent to Kholmishche riassaphore-monk George (Yermakov), whose obedience it was to prepare for burial those who had reposed. With him went Fr. Nektary's cell-attendant, Fr. Sebastian, who by the Elder's blessing was serving at that time as a hierodeacon in Kozelsk. Fr. Dositheus told them to have a look at the situation; if it was necessary, he would come right away. Then he sat sorrowfully by the window, ready at any moment to set out on his way, but no summons followed.

Crossing the threshold of Denezhkin's house, Fr. George crossed himself and said, "Christ is risen!" No one answered him. The Optina fathers understood that they were not wanted here. Seeing that the Elder was not laid out according to the monastic rule, Fr. George arranged everything in the proper order. He himself adjusted the covering over his face. Monks Sebastian and Peter (the cell-attendant) vested the Elder according to the monastic order.

Elder Nektary on his deathbed.
A photograph preserved by Fr. Adrian for his whole life.

The site of the house in which Elder Nektary died,
as it looks today—no trace!

Nina Konstantinovna Bruni recalled, "We were given a piece of one of the Elder's old riassas and were blessed to embroider the Crucifixion on it. The Elder's face was covered with this cloth."

The Muscovites arrived, with Fr. Sergius Mechev at their head. Fr. Peter Petrikov, Deacon Boris Kholchev, Fr. Andrew Elbson and Fr. Alexander Gumanovsky served a *Parastasis* but did not invite Fr. Sebastian to take part. He paid his respects to the reposed after them. Fr. George assisted him, and the nuns that came from Kozelsk sang.

Over the course of the following days people from Smolensk, Orel and Kaluga gathered in Kholmishche. An oak-log coffin was brought by the Elder's spiritual children, a husband and wife of the merchant class, who owned a store. They also brought shoes for the deceased. Since none of them commemorated Metropolitan Sergius, the Optina fathers, as commemorators, were left out of the funeral. The Levchenko family had intended to be present at the funeral, but they were told that no one from Kozelsk would be admitted. Irina Viktorovna recalled, "I remember how Fr. Lawrence, sorrowing, with tears in his eyes, said, 'But Fr. Nektary is our Elder.' And none of them went to Kholmishche, although there were many Optina people in Kozelsk. They occupied practically all the positions in the St. George Cathedral: Hieromonk Macarius, who was formerly in charge of the monastery storehouse, monk Cleopas the acolyte, Hieromonk Sabbatius the choirmaster, and Fr. Theodotus the ecclesiarch. In the Dormition Cathedral served Bishop Micah of Ufa, who had retired in the monastery not long before the revolution, as well as Archimandrite Isaac (Bobrakov).

They had delayed the burial in expectation of all those who had been summoned and of the arrival of the log-coffin. Finally, at two in the morning on Tuesday, May 3/16, the last group of people arrived from Moscow with the hollowed-out log.

The funeral procession began at five that morning. The house had been surrounded by crowds of people since the previous evening. So many had assembled that it gave the impression of a great celebration. People had come from all the local villages and, as we later learned, the GPU had come from Moscow.

Transferring the Elder from the house to the Kholmishche Church of the Protection took over an hour, due to the uninterrupted lities. When Fr. Nektary was brought into the church a concelebrated Pannikhida began. Fr. Alexis, the head of the diocese of Plokhino, took part in the burial. He was so considerate that he yielded the first place to Fr. Sergius Mechev. After the Pannikhida the Liturgy began. There were a great many priests. The sermon was given by the local priest, Fr. Tikhon, owing to the circumstances. After the Liturgy the funeral began, in accordance with the monastic rule, and then the procession to the cemetery, with lities and Paschal hymns. The people returned home only at five in the evening. A memorial meal was arranged in Denezhkin's house, and the Muscovites put together such an abundance that one could not help but be amazed. A large cross was brought, apparently from Moscow, and was set up at the head of the grave. The next day the ordeal with the GPU began.

An interesting incident occurred that night. The Elder had two cell-attendants—Fr. Sebastian, and the simple-hearted Fr. Peter, who ardently loved his Elder.* When he was deprived of his dear Optina, he hid in the woods. When he saw that the cross

* Not long before his death, the Elder asked Peter: "You're still not tonsured?"

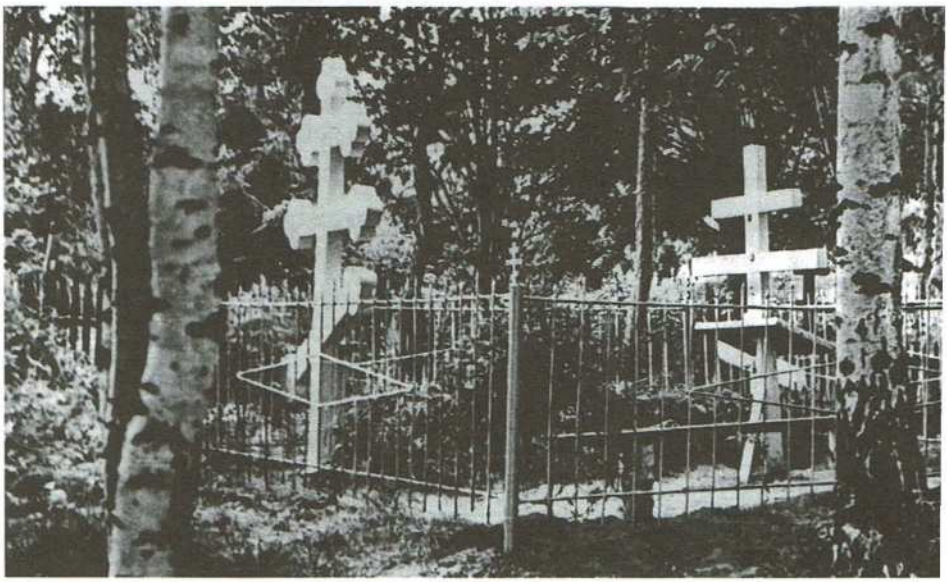
"Not yet."

"You have to be tonsured into the mantia."

"How can I be clothed in the mantia in the face of such a struggle? [that is, in the face of the revolutionary terror, and without a monastery to live in]."

"This will be to your profit: the mantia will help you to overcome all of this. And don't you dare come to see me without a mantia."

And as an obedience he was clothed in the angelic image.



The two crosses on Elder Nektary's grave.

had not been placed eastward, at the foot of his Elder's grave, and that the Elder did not lie with his face toward the cross, he became filled with zealous indignation. He came at night, tore down the cross that had been set up, chopped a new one with an axe and placed it at the Elder's feet, on the east side. In the morning they discovered the new cross. They did not want to remove the former cross, and so they reassembled it and erected it in its former place. Thus there were two crosses on the Elder's grave.

Two crosses! Two crosses at the earthly resting place of him who, during his whole suffering life bore, not only his own monastic cross, but the cross of humanity—the cross of his neighbor, of his brother! And of course he is not forgotten! There lay beneath his whole meek character something reminiscent of the Transfiguration—something brilliant which does not submit to the intellectual eye of humanity, but is an exultant feeling of triumph tangible only to the heart. This was felt and borne within by those who made a pilgrimage to the grave of the Elder.

There at the Elder's grave stood the two lonely Optina fathers—Fr. Peter and Fr. Sebastian, who trembled with sobs. From that day until the end of his life, Fr. Sebastian's head twitched somewhat, and doctors were powerless to help.

...In 1935 thieves dug up the Elder's grave, hoping to find valuables. They tore the lid off the coffin and the covering from the face of the dead man and then leaned the open coffin against a tree. In the morning, as some little children were leading horses from their nightly grazing spot, they saw the coffin and galloped to the village, shouting, "A monk has risen from the grave!" The collective farm workers ran to the cemetery and saw that "the Elder was standing there incorrupt—his skin was wax-colored and his arms and hands were soft." One woman brought a white silk covering and they covered the face of the Elder with it. Then they closed the coffin and lowered it into the grave, singing "Holy God."

Pannikhida being served over the newly uncovered relics of Elder Nektary. The two old crosses from the Elder's grave can be seen in the background.

6

The Uncovering of His Holy Relics

(1929-1989)

On November 4, 1987 the Optina Monastery of the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple was returned to the Orthodox Church. People again streamed to Optina that they might, within its holy walls, beg the prayers of the reposed Elders; to be healed spiritually and bodily through their grace-filled help; to gain understanding in their own lives, in their quest for spiritual guidance and the path of salvation.

The day came when Elder Nektary also returned to Optina. Monday, July 3/16, 1989, the day of the uncovering of the relics of St. Philip of Moscow who was, like Elder Nektary, persecuted and tormented, was also the day of the uncovering of the holy relics of Elder Nektary. The Monastery had long before begun to prepare for this great event. A coffin had been made ahead of time for the honorable remains of the saint, and everything was carefully thought out and considered. After having prayed at the graves of the Optina Elders and taken a blessing from the acting Superior of the Monastery, Archimandrite Evlogy, at nine in the evening on July 2/15, a group of five brothers and two laymen left Optina for Kholmishche, the place of the repose of the holy remains of Elder Nektary. Also taking part in the trip were Abbot Polycarp (the group's guide), Hierodeacon Michael,

Monk Gabriel, novices Igor Vetrov and Sergius Fomin, archaeologist Sergius Alexeyevich Belyaev (long a sincere friend of Optina, who had led those who uncovered the holy relics of St. Ambrose of Optina the previous year), and professional photographer Oleg Makarov. We present here some pages from the journal of one of the direct participants in this great event, which imparted joy, not only to the Russian Church, but to the whole Orthodox world—for the name of the mellifluous Optina Elder Nektary is pronounced with respect and love to all the ends of the world.

"On the way we visited Fr. Nicholas, who serves in Ulyanovo. He declined for a long time, considering himself unworthy, but we persuaded him to go. His matushka and two of his sons went with us. We spent the night in the Resurrection Church, where Fr. Nicholas serves.... We left Ulyanovo for Kholmishche at four in the morning. The road was very poor, but our mood was most remarkable. And we had no doubt of our success, although the storm of the times had passed, not sparing anything holy even in this remote corner of our much-suffering fatherland. The old residents related that during the last war, sent by the Merciful Lord because of our sins, the cemetery in Kholmishche had been totally dug up by trenches. On the road we sang prayers. My heart was jubilant with ineffable joy. We arrived at the spot at 5:30 in the morning. We were shown the place of burial of the honorable relics of Elder Nektary by a parishioner of the Ulyanovo church.

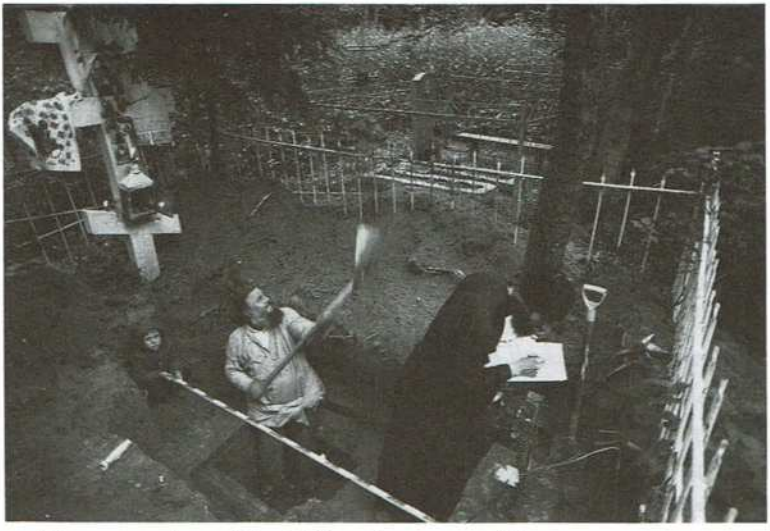
"The village cemetery is located in a picturesque spot, like a painting by the famous artist Nesterov. The path to it lay through a field covered with flowers. The cemetery itself was located in a spruce forest. The Elder's grave had been looked after by a considerate hand. Around it was a high metal fence adorned with white flowers, and within the enclosure were two benches. Three small pines bent over the grave-mound in

honor of the Holy Trinity. Flowers were planted there, and among them there lay Paschal eggs and small wreaths. Over the grave were two new crosses—a wooden one and a metal one, both painted with the same white paint. On the wooden one was the inscription, "Elder Hieroschema-monk Nektary," and a photographic portrait of the Elder. The two old crosses stood together, leaning against a tree.... When we arrived, a lampada was burning in a lamp-holder on the metal cross. By all this it could be seen that this holy place was not forgotten. *In everlasting remembrance shall the righteous be* (Ps. 111:6).

"After serving a lity for the reposed Elder we began to dig. During the work the Psalter was read uninterruptedly. We finished during the second reading of the Psalter, at the ninetieth Psalm—*He that dwelleth in the help of the Most High.* We came across bullets in the earth and shell fragments. We even found a flattened warhead. Reaching a depth of about three feet, we discovered the top of the crypt.* It was made of brick, like all the crypts of those buried in Optina. It was all filled up inside with sand, which had fallen in through a large break in the upper covering.... In the sand we found one of his cuffs, in which there was part of a prayer rope. As soon as we had reached the crypt we all began to sense a wondrous fragrance.

"Despite the fact that we had hardly slept at all on the previous night and had eaten nothing before one o'clock, until we found the holy relics; despite the exhausting and poor road, the uninterrupted heavy labor, and the cruel mosquito bites from the great multitude of mosquitoes there, we were animated by a radiant joy and strengthened by the grace of the Lord. The hand of God's leadership was felt to such a degree in all those

* According to another source, at a depth of four and a half feet a coffin containing the remains of schema-nun Nektaria (Kontzevitch) was found, and the relics of Elder Nektary were located slightly to one side and below her coffin (*Ascetics of Piety of the Twentieth Century*, 1994, pp. 375-76).



The excavation of St. Nektary's grave, while measurements are taken and the Psalter is read.

The holy relics of St. Nektary of Optina.

present that it remained only to submit to it and rejoice that the man-loving Lord had vouchsafed us sinners to be present on such an outstanding occasion of His goodness and greatness. All questions were solved jointly with amazing oneness of soul and mutual understanding. The grace of God and love for Elder Nektary united us all.

"The work was suspended just long enough to serve a lity for Elder Nektary. We performed five such lities in all. Fr. Nicholas greatly helped us in the work. He labored from the very beginning until nine o'clock in the morning, when he left to serve the Sunday Liturgy in his church. His eldest son remained with us. Fr. Nicholas related that on this day the Lord gathered more than seventy parishioners, when usually there were only ten to fifteen people on Sundays. They all prayed for us, that the Lord would give us strength for the holy work we were doing.

"As soon as we had dismantled the upper portion of the crypt we removed all the sand from it. The coffin was disclosed, at the bottom of which we noticed a piece of skull. We had the thought that there were no relics and we were greatly distressed. But when we tried to dig further anyway, it became clear that we had taken the collapsed lid of the coffin for the bottom. The skull had caused it to sag in the middle and was now protruding. Our distress turned to joy and exhilaration. When we removed the lid of the coffin there appeared before our unworthy eyes the honorable relics of Elder Nektary, safe and entire. By His great good-heartedness the Lord had protected them for the last times, to the consolation of us unworthy ones, the last Optina monks. The Elder's remains were vested in a mantia and epitrachelion; on one hand was a cuff with a prayer rope that had fallen to pieces. The belt was there and on the skull there was the leather band from the inside of his klobuk—everything was in a very good state of preservation. With fear of God and love we began reverently to venerate his relics, and suddenly noticed

that on the forehead of the skull there was what looked like the outline of a cross. Then we all decided that this was God's sign that attested to the fact that the Elder had been tonsured into the schema. After this the relics were placed with reverence into a new mantia. We also packed and took with us the coffin and earth from the grave. In the process of the work, measurements and drawings were made—the scientific side of the excavation was led by Professor Sergius Alexeyevich Belyaev. Oleg Makarov took photographs constantly, filling up sixteen rolls of film. We appended to the inscription on the cross: "The relics of Elder Nektary were uncovered and translated to Optina on July 3/16, 1989." This cross was left at the spot where the honorable relics of the Elder had reposed for so many years.

"It is amazing and, of course, not coincidental, that the relics of Elder Nektary—the spiritual son of St. Ambrose of Optina—were found and removed exactly nine months to the day after the opening of the relics of his spiritual teacher and father (October 3/16, 1988).

"...At six in the evening we left for Optina. Along the way we were met by the head priest of the church in Nizhnie Pryski, Fr. Leonty, in his car. Hearing of the holy event, he hastened to Kholmishche to venerate the relics of Elder Nektary of blessed memory, whom he greatly revered. To inform the brothers of the Monastery about the successful completion of the work and to have them prepare a triumphant meeting for the relics, Fr. Polycarp switched to Fr. Leonty's car and went on ahead of us. We visited Fr. Nicholas and only from there did we set out for the Monastery.

"At seven in the evening the holy relics were triumphantly met in Optina with the ringing of bells at the Kaluga gate by the brothers and the people. Fr. Polycarp served a lity for the reposed, after which the relics were transferred to a new coffin lined with green velvet. While the Trisagion was being sung with

Censing of the relics on the church portico.

The translation and veneration of the relics in the main church of Optina.

censing and the ringing of bells, those who had been to Kholmishche bore him to the portico of the Church of the Entry of the Theotokos. While the triumphant procession moved through the Monastery, which was meeting its Elder with honor after a sixty-five-year separation from him, a wondrous fragrance emanated from the relics, which could be sensed at a distance of one hundred or more feet. On the church portico, in the presence of a great number of pilgrims, one more lity was served by the full assembly of priests and all the brothers. Then the relics were borne into the church, where a solemn Pannikhida for 'the ever-memorable Elder Hieroschema-monk Nektary, reposed in blessedness,' was served. Afterwards, Hieromonk Melchisedek, gave a sermon: 'The day and hour have come when the holy Optina Elders are again gathered together. Fathers, brothers and sisters—today the Lord has granted us great joy. Optina's own son has returned to her!'

"To the singing of the irmoi of the Canon of Great Saturday, with the sorrowful ringing of the bells, the relics were carried around the Church of the Entry and then were again carried inside.

"At present the relics are located by the altar dedicated to St. Ambrose, on the west side. Over the relics there was hung the icon of the Mother of God 'Of the Three Hands,' embroidered on linen, which had always hung in Elder Nektary's cell when he was still living in Optina Skete. The icon was donated by the spiritual children of Archimandrite Boris (Kholchev) from Tashkent, who had recently reposed. Fr. Boris, who wrote recollections of Elder Nektary,* had been his spiritual son."

Elder Nektary bore the cross of eldership during the years of the most difficult ordeals for the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian people—years of persecution of Christians, of fighting against God, of fratricidal war, of hunger and devastation.

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* See p. 439.

The embroidered icon of the of the Mother of God "Of the Three Hands," which belonged to Elder Nektary, and which now hangs over his reliquary in Optina.

And the Elder himself passed through the ordeals that fell to the lot of many people of that time—he too was persecuted and exiled. In the years of cruel temptation, not only did he bear the cross of his own trials; he took upon himself the misfortunes, deprivations and woes of many people, and the burden of their sins. He prayed for the whole suffering nation, healed people and strengthened them in faith.

In witness to the fact that the Elder has not abandoned us even after his righteous repose, there have been manifestations of miracles after his death.

A priest of the city of Belev reported the following about one of his parishioners who, due to an infirmity of the legs, could not walk. Doctors declined to treat her, citing her advanced age. The priest gave her sand from the Elder's grave and advised her to apply it to her ailing legs. The next day the old woman came herself to the church and thanked God and the Elder for her healing.

In the autumn of 1996 a woman from the Ukraine wrote to Optina that, due to the terrible state of the economy, she decided to spend what money she had on sunflower oil, and to sell it to support herself. The oil, in a large metal drum, had to be transported to a distant market. The cover of the drum was put on so tightly that it could only be removed with a special tool provided by the refinery. After it was sealed, the drum was loaded onto a truck and she set off, having paid for the transport with the last of her funds. When they had almost reached the market, she suddenly realized that she had forgotten to take the tool. It was impossible to go back, and yet she knew that there was no way to open the drum without it. She suddenly remembered an incident from the life of Elder Nektary, when he had blessed a man to lift a heavy load which was beyond his strength to lift. After the blessing, he was able to lift it with ease. The woman began to

pray to the Elder to help her. When they arrived at the market and unloaded the drum, she reached over and untwisted the cover with her bare hands. She is certain that this was done through the prayers of the Elder, since she had seen the drum sealed tightly at the refinery.

The following miracles were reported by Archpriest Leonty, Superior of the Holy Transfiguration Church in the Village of Nizhnie Pryski:

1. More than thirty years ago I came to the village of Nizhnie Pryski for the first time. By the mercy of God I had been assigned to the parish in this village, located not far at all from the famous Optina Monastery. Among the parishioners of the church were some aged women who remembered the Optina Elder Nektary well, had met him, conversed with him, and were his spiritual children, his great and heartfelt admirers. And here they had collected close to 200 roubles* and asked me to change the old, rotten wooden enclosure at the Elder's grave for a new metal one. Reverently, with trepidation of soul, I accepted this offering from the seventy-year-old women and resolved to take up the work as quickly as possible. There was a school in Optina then. With the help of the workers we succeeded in making a metal fence and loaded into a truck the metal containers with water, cement, sand, gravel, crowbars, and the other construction necessities.

We set out for the village of Kholmishche. I was driving first and didn't know the road. We drove far into the wilds; the road before us ended and there was a small river. For some reason the bridge was disassembled and in its place floated ancient logs and planks. What was there to do? The depth of the river was not great, but there was no way we were going to get across in the truck and it was impossible to turn around. It seemed that human power was helpless here. I crossed myself,

* This was a considerable sum in those days.—Ed.

mentally asked for heavenly intercession, and began to fix up the crossing. With difficulty we gathered the logs and set the planks on them, slab side down. I took a look at our bridge and it looked pretty shaky to me. The logs were old, half-rotten and poorly fastened together, and the truck was heavily loaded. If it got stuck we'd never get it out. But with God's help the truck raced across and the boards flew in all directions. We looked back and didn't believe that the truck could have crossed here. The tires were wet and so were the planks; the truck could have fallen off at any moment. This was a great miracle, a little bit of manifest grace, which could not only be seen but sensed by the heart. The feeling lay deep in my heart that what had happened with us was not just an accident or luck, but a great sign from God through the prayers of Elder Nektary.

2. The earth and sand over Elder Nektary's grave are imbued with the wondrous grace of God. The Elder's spiritual children recounted the following incident to me. One old woman lived in Moscow in a small wooden house. Seeing a huge construction project of many-storied buildings around her, and fearing for her little home, she began to beg for Elder Nektary's intercession. Sprinkling earth from the Elder's grave around her dwelling, she began to pray earnestly to the Elder that he would help her to remain living in her little house, in which she had lived for so long. And a miracle occurred. The huge construction project reached her house, stepped over it, and kept going. Only after her death was this house demolished.

3. I often had occasion to be the guest of an old woman who lived in Moscow on Mir Prospect in a wooden house. She also did not want to move to another place. She sprinkled earth from Elder Nektary's grave in her room and begged him to protect her. And she continued living in that house up to her death. Now imagine this—when she had reposed the house was torn down, and in its place, practically in the very

center of the city, a flower garden was built. I saw this with my own eyes.

The following is taken from the memoirs of Ludmilla D:

I had known about the Optina Elders long ago, many years before the [recent] opening of the Monastery at Optina. I was drawn to the great Elder Nektary more than to the others. Once my favorite Elder even helped me, and I'll remember this event all my life.

It was the end of the Nativity Fast. I was near Moscow but couldn't leave, since my daughter-in-law had become ill. The doctor in the ambulance made the diagnosis—croupous inflammation of the lungs. It had to be treated. My daughter-in-law recovered, and I myself took sick, but I arrived in Moscow on January 5 [new style]. I became so ill that I no longer intended to go to Optina. Almost from the very opening of the Monastery I had decorated the church on feast days and, of course, on Christ's Nativity I would have been happy to fulfill this obedience ... and here I had become so sick. I became upset that I couldn't go, and suddenly my spiritual sister from Zhitomir called me at nine in the morning. I complained to her about my having gotten sick. She said to me, "Go to Optina—you'll recover there." And I went.

It should be said that one must leave for Optina in the morning—the more so in winter, since it gets dark early. I arrived in Kaluga, and it had already begun to grow dark. When I reached the intersection in Kozelsk it was already dark. I thought, 'If only I had taken a travelling companion.' I prayed to the Lord and to St. Nicholas and to the Optina Elders. One soldier took pity on me and brought me in a gazik* right to the Zhizdra.

The winter of that year, 1989, was warm, and the ice on the river was thin and lightly covered with snow. Well, on a

* The nickname for a kind of automobile.—TRANS.

crazy impulse I was out on the river at full tilt. I let myself down along the gently-sloping bank, crossed a third of the river, looked by chance to the side and—O horror!—I saw two large patches of unfrozen water. I was scared stiff—my feet wouldn't move, thoughts flashed through my head, and I stood rooted to the spot. All of a sudden I implored, 'Holy Elder Nektary, carry me across!' And so I went, very carefully. I had walked ten feet and was almost at the very bank when I heard behind me a roar to the skies. I looked, and behind me all the ice up to the opposite bank had caved in, and only water darkened the river. Well, my eyes grew dark, too. Not feeling my feet beneath me I raced to the Monastery. From the exertion, the illness, and everything I'd been through I even had a nosebleed, but afterwards it all quickly passed.

Sometime later, after the Prayers of Thanksgiving [after Holy Communion], I understood what harm could have come to me; but by the mercy of God and through the prayers of the great Elder Nektary I had been delivered in a miraculous way from potential death.

Many other miracles have been performed and continue to be performed to this day through the prayers of Elder Nektary.

And the rebirth of Optina Monastery after many years of neglect and humiliation—is this not a miracle perceptible to all—a witness to the grace-filled prayers and help of the Optina Elders, which can be felt by the multitude of people who are again streaming to its holy walls?

Just as during the life of the holy Elder Nektary, so also after his blessed repose, each person who turns to him with true faith has received grace-filled help. Let us also unceasingly implore the great Optina Elder, that he would intercede before the throne of God for our salvation.

Holy Father Nektary, pray to God for us!

PART IV

A Gathering of Witnesses: Those Who Saw the Saint Alive

The life of a righteous man is multifaceted—he appears to one man in one light, and to another in quite a different spectrum. Seemingly incidental flashes of a righteous man's attitudes have a deeper significance, for they stem from a heartbeat that faces eternity and God.

—Amadeus Undermoss

A mystical vision of heavenly birds, representing the myriad of disciples that flocks to one whose soul soars in God's world, above the pettiness of the fallen world. Detail from a late 17th-century icon of St. Sergius of Radonezh.

I

Glimpses into the Unseen World

ARCHPRIEST SERGIUS SIDEROV*

The first twenty-five years of St. Nektary's monastic life were spent enclosed in Optina Skete in silence, in the study of the word of God, of the monastic Fathers, and of arts and sciences. These were his formative years, shrouded in a monastic mystery, as when Moses spoke with God from the cleft in the rock. After he had graduated from that state, the Lord revealed Fr. Nektary in the public office of eldership, as a pechalnik *(one who co-suffers) for the suffering Russian land. The following is a glimpse into this world, unseen to our naked eye.*

THE FIRST TIME I had a talk with Elder Anatole he asked me if I had been to see Fr. Nektary. I replied that I hadn't seen him. Fr. Anatole said to me, "How is it that you've been living in Optina Monastery and haven't been to see the Elder? Go see him today. He's a great Elder, like Fr. Ambrose was."

* From the notes of Archpriest Sergius Sidorov, written in 1933-1936, revised by his daughter Vera Sergeyevna Bobrinskaya in 1983, and preserved in the archives of Optina Monastery. Taken from *The Life of Optina Elder Nektary*, pp. 188-96.

Fr. Nektary lived in the Skete, to the right of the holy gates, in Elder Ambrose's cell (the furnishings from Elder Ambrose's cell were in Fr. Theodosius' cell). I came to see him at two in the afternoon, right after trapeza. The sun played brightly upon the white walls of the cell. The first small droplets of spring fell from the roof and burst into a diamond-like spray on the steps of the steep staircase. I knocked on the door and said the prayer. There was no one in the Skete. The cheerful cries of sparrows rang out sonorously among the snowdrifts and in the birches. At my knock, slow, shuffling footsteps could be heard, and the door opened. In the doorway of the cell stood the Elder, with beautiful white locks of hair, a sparse yellowish beard, and gray eyes. This was Fr. Nektary.

I asked his blessing and said that I had been sent to him by Fr. Anatole. The Elder blessed me and with a smile said merrily, "Well now, that's good that you wound up going to Fr. Anatole for guidance. Some people seek me out as an elder; but I—what can I tell you—I'm just a pie without a filling. But Fr. Anatole—well, he's just like a pie with a filling." Having said this he blessed me three times and retired into his cell.

... Late in the evening M. and I went for a stroll through the monastery cemetery. The lampadas at the graves were glowing. The white snow shone with frost. The stars were sparkling in the sky. The crosses on the bell tower and the Optina churches were lit up by moonbeams. The chimes of the clock in the tower were playing; from afar the noises of the railroad reached us and broke the quiet of the evening stillness. Singing could be heard in Fr. Anatole's chapel. When M. and I came up to the chapel, Fr. Anatole and Fr. Nektary came out in our direction. Fr. Nektary had a small trebnik. We could clearly make out his glance and his smile. Fr. Anatole said something to him quickly, continually crossing himself and bowing to the graves. We did not dare approach the Elders and hastily crossed over to another path.

The next day, December 8, I was at Fr. Nektary's. I was alone, although a whole company of my acquaintances, headed by a certain N., a benefactress of Optina Monastery, had decided to visit him. I was late for this joint visit, having been detained by Fr. Anatole. They told me that when they came to the Elder, N. began to read her ode of praise to him. Later, he began to read Derzhavin's poem, "God," to her, and after the reading he dismissed his visitors.

I found the door of the cell open and passed straight in to the Elder's office. This was a small room entirely hung with icons. On the wall there hung a portrait of Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow and some photographs of clergy unknown to me. The Elder was not in the office, but he quickly came in from the adjacent room. He was dressed in a gray podrasnik belted with a light blue cord. He recognized me and blessed me affectionately. I did not have the intention of troubling the Elder with conversation, since I was under the guidance of Fr. Anatole and did not have the kinds of needs for which one turns to men of spiritual experience for guidance, and I did not dare to bother them with conversations about mundane, everyday affairs.

But when, having received his blessing, I wanted to leave, Fr. Nektary held me back. "It wouldn't trouble you to read to me, would it?" he asked, giving me a book. This was the poetry of Pushkin. I opened the small volume of the Surovinsky edition and began to read: "When for a mortal the clamorous day falls silent.... " Afterwards the Elder thanked me and said, "Many say that one need not read poetry; but you see, Fr. Ambrose loved poetry, especially Krilov's fables. I think that not only is one permitted to read poems, but he ought to. But right now, let's pray."

He knelt before the icon of the Heavenly Queen and, telling me to kneel beside him, began to read the Akathist to our

Lady. There was a stillness, but not a grim stillness, with sounds of rustling and breathing; rather, it was peaceful and bright, like some eternal, blessed repose, woven of golden thread.

In the autumn of 1917 I was in Optina and received Holy Communion on my nameday, September 25 (old style). The rule for communicants was read in the Monastery at two or three in the morning. Novices walked in the corridor of the guesthouse and, ringing a small bell, sang: "It's God's time—pray; Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us."

I went out quickly and plunged into the pre-dawn cold. A window in one of the churches was glowing with a faint orange light. There the novice whose turn it was to read was reading the Rule, and the darkness of the deserted church echoed his resonant voice. Afterwards I hurried to the early Liturgy in the Skete.

I remembered that the gates to the road leading to the Skete were locked; and I had to walk all the way around the monastery cemetery until finally, along a path at the end of the southern wall, I emerged from the enclosure. It was dark all around and the pale blue lights of the fireflies were glowing. I walked across the hummocks and stumbled over the brushwood; the foliage rustled beneath my feet. It seemed as if the path would have no end, and I was fearful that I had gotten lost. And suddenly on the horizon the forest was ablaze with gold and crimson, some church domes appeared, and the bells were rhythmically rung with a silvery sound. The clear, booming peals trembled in the gusts of cool wind.

I ended up at the skete walls from the side opposite the entrance. When I entered the Skete, the morning star came out over the wooden church and lights appeared in the windows of the cells. To my surprise, I was the first to arrive. The bell rang out its invitation. Slowly crossing himself, not hurrying, the

gate keeper went over and opened the church. I sat on a bench opposite the flower garden.

The door of Elder Nektary's cell squeaked with a long creaking sound. This cell was opposite the bench. I saw the Elder. He was in a white podrasnik, shaded by the azure dawn, and seemed to be so very radiant. He stopped on the porch and lifted his hand upwards. And suddenly a flock of white doves began to circle around his head and then sat on his shoulders and flew down to his feet, only to rise up again and disappear into the pink haze of the early morning. The peal of the bell resoundingly called us to prayer....

I was with Fr. Nektary on September 30 after the late Liturgy. The cell-attendant let me in; there were no people there. I entered, and right then the joyful Elder appeared. He gave me the book *Narratives of the Earthly Life of the Most Holy Theotokos* and then retired. I placed the book on an analogion before a large icon of the Mother of God and began to read. Hours went by—no Elder. I read through almost the entire book. The rays of the autumn sun began to glow with the uneasy light of dusk. The rest period after lunch had ended long ago. I had spent four hours alone in the reception room.

The Elder entered unnoticed, embraced me affectionately and invited me to his cell to eat fish and drink compote made of fresh pears and apples, and while I ate he spoke with me. He told me not to attach any significance to bad omens, since omens are premonitions—even if they are sometimes correct—of future events, if before these events you do not ask God to deliver you from demons. Therefore one must always pray to God at the time of premonitions of misfortune. The Elder also commanded me to read, without fail, the whole Rule before Holy Communion. "Especially," he said, "if you are preparing yourself to be a priest." At this point Fr. Nektary related the following incident to me:

One Optina hieromonk appeared to the Elder after death (I don't recall his name) and said that he had been delivered from the toll-houses since he always served Liturgy at peace with all and, when preparing for it, he read through all the prescribed rules. "But the main rule is love and peace," said the Elder. "Now remember the testament of Fr. Moses, the great founder of our Monastery: 'Love all and do not dare to be at enmity when you are preparing to approach the Holy Mysteries, lest you commune as did Judas.'"

Fr. Nektary commanded me likewise not to become attached to earthly objects, saying that any spoon—let alone a golden one, but even a wooden one—can cause trouble. "You'll love it and will be troubled in spirit if it's lost. And if irritation can enter your soul from such a trifle, and with irritation, sin, and with sin, a demon, then what good can you expect?" the Elder concluded. I spent about an hour in conversation with him.

The last time I saw Fr. Nektary was on the feast of the Protection [of the Mother of God] after the early Liturgy. There are two churches in the Skete—one of wood, built by Fr. Moses (Putilov), and the other of stone.... I was at the service in the stone one, and from there I wanted to go and see Fr. Nektary in his cell to say farewell to him. At the end of the Liturgy I was told that he was in the wooden church and was calling for me. I went there straightaway and found him blessing the people in the middle of the church. He was in a warm black riassa and a klobuk. He blessed me and said that he wanted to see me and had ordered that I be sought out.

"I'm leaving Optina today—bless me," said I.

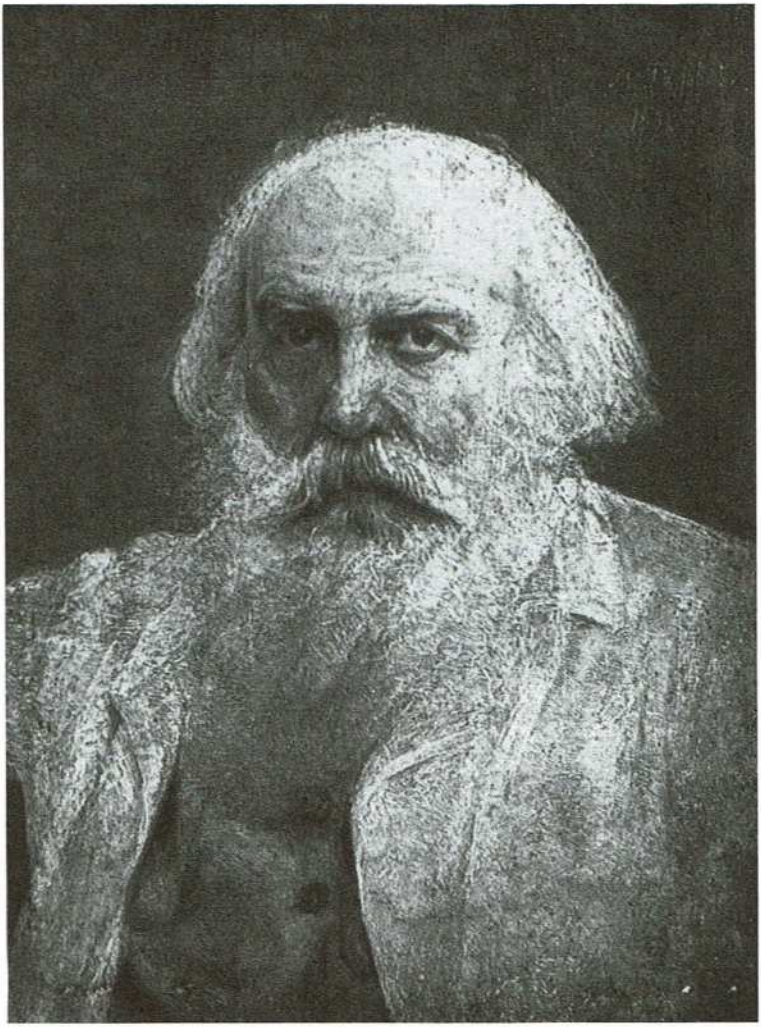
"That's fine; that's just why I expressly wanted to see you today. Come and see us again."

"I was thinking of coming for Nativity," I replied.

Optina Skete from inside the enclosure. The cheerful, sunny look so characteristic of Optina. The cell on the right is the skete Superior's cell, from which Saints Anthony, Macarius, Hilarion, Anatole I, Barsanuphus and Theodosius each, in his turn, cared for the spiritual lives of the skete brethren, as well as of those who came to them from the world.

"Yes, if you don't come for Nativity, we won't see each other again," said the Elder and, giving me a prosphora at parting, he went quickly towards the exit.

But I didn't fulfill my good intention to visit Optina at Nativity, and I never saw the great Elder again.



Sergei Alexandrovich Nilus. Portrait by an unknown artist from Chernigov. Oil. 1928.

2

The Wisdom of Foolishness for Christ's Sake

SERGEI NILUS

*At the beginning of this century, at the invitation of the Optina monks, church writer Sergei Nilus lived near Optina in a house once occupied by writer K. Leontiev, on the bank of the river Zhizdra. While there he kept a diary, into which he would record encounters with various interesting people, as well as items that he would fish out of the monastery archives. He called this journal—originally serialized in a church publication and finally printed in 1916 as a single book—*On the Bank of God's River.

*Having left Optina in 1911, he continued to publish entries from this journal elsewhere, gathering things of interest from Optina. The following excerpts are from those journals.**

1. THE FALLACY OF HUMAN LOVE

March 7, 1910

Returning home from the Skete we found a whole company of people, among whom were our dear spiritual friend, Fr. Nektary, and a landowner—Elder Ambrose's spiritual

* Taken from *The Unknown Nilus,* vol. I, pp. 361, 373-75.

daughter—who, for the sake of Optina and its Elders, settled in a forest cabin belonging to a neighboring landowner of Optina, Kashkin.

"Mrs. Kashkina was saying to me," the desert-dwelling lady told us at our conversation around the samovar, "that by the mercy and love of God everyone, even unrepentent evildoers and apostates, will be saved through sorrows and earthly sufferings. This seems correct to me. What do you think about this, Fr. Nektary?"

"Two thieves," he replied briefly, "hung on crosses alongside the Savior, but only one entered into Paradise."

"Ah, what truth!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't it occur to me to answer Kashkina that way?"

It didn't occur to you—I thought—because you, matushka, are not Fr. Nektary.

2. CHILD-LIKE PURITY

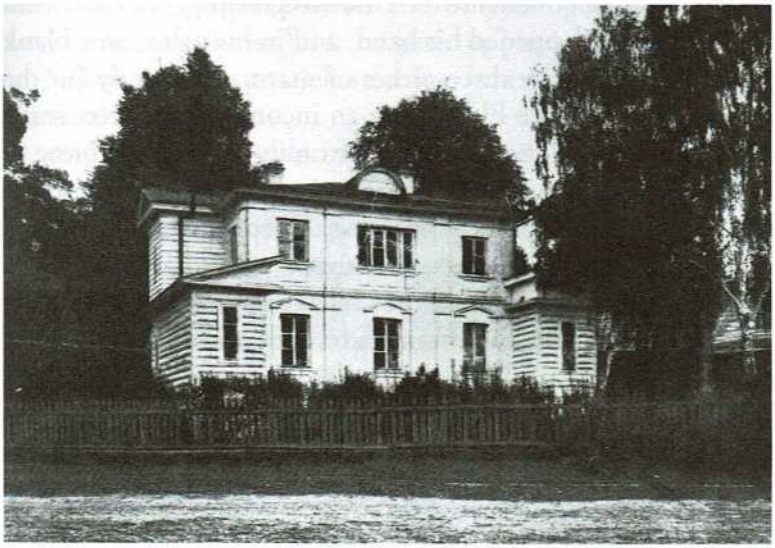
March 17, 1910

I went today to our Optina infirmary to visit our sick friend, Fr. Nektary. This is already the fourth day since he was brought from the Skete and placed in the same cell in which Fr. Theodosius recently reposed. To my great joy I found him on the road to recovery. Fr. Nektary greeted me with the announcement that a terrible dream had troubled him all night, which he had seen with unusual clarity.

"What did you see?" I asked with particular interest, knowing the spiritual height of our Elder.

"I saw a revolution in Russia, a terrible insurrection."

The subsequent narrative was interrupted by the appearance of the infirmary medical assistant, who had come to take the patient's temperature. To my great joy, his temperature turned out to be normal.



The house in which Sergei Nilus lived, where Elder Nektary used to visit him. This house was built for Archimandrite Juvenaly (later Bishop of Vilnius), who wrote the Life of Elder Moses of Optina while living there. The writer Constantine Leontiev also resided there at one time.

After the medical assistant had left I chanced to be the witness to a touching and unforgettable scene. We did not manage to return to the interrupted narrative when, with a prayer, there entered one of the most respected Optina Elders, who was living in retirement in the infirmary.* I looked—in the Elder's sleeves there was stored something in the nature of a "consolation" for the sick one.... After a mutual greeting, the Elder who had just come in opened his hand; and in his palm, on a blank piece of paper, were three pieces of marmalade candy [in the shape of boots]. The Elder, with an incomparably sweet smile on his clear, childlike face, began steadily to take one piece of candy after another from the paper, and brought them over, one by one, to our friend, repeating, "Here you are Batiushka, Fr. Nektary, you will be so kind as to see, a little bast boot. Only forgive us—we didn't have time to shake the snow off the sole."

The "snow" on the marmelade boot was a few grains of sugar.

"And this," the Elder continued in the same spirit, "is a strawberry for you in the middle of winter!"

And the "strawberry" passed in the same way from his hand to Fr. Nektary's hands.

"And this—please pardon me—is just one slice of orange."

And right then both Elders began to laugh with such angelic, childlike laughter that my foolish eyes were even moved to tears.

Fr. Nektary accepted these splendid gifts, placed them carefully on the night stand and said, "Your little bast boot, my Batiushka—just see what it reminded me of! The great Tsar Peter sought, as you know, to attain everything through his own mind and personal experience: he worked as a carpenter, as a cabinet-maker, and at the forge. He finally got to bast shoes—he decided to try to weave bast shoes himself. So

* By all appearances, this was Schema-archimandrite Agapit.—Ed.

he began to make them—he wove and wove, and then took them and threw them aside, adding with dissatisfaction, 'An exceedingly laborious business, and little profitable.' And so, my Batiushka, the Tsar wanted to weave bast shoes, but since it wasn't a royal matter, he had to quit it."

And both Elders again laughed to the point of tears; they burst out laughing wordlessly and only the gift-giving Elder barely managed through his laughter to put in a word: "Well, Fr. Nektary! Well, you jokester! Just where does he know all this from?"

And I was in tears—drip, drip! One must know, as I do, the profound humility of wisdom and spiritual mind of both holy Elders in order to appreciate the success both for them and for me of these innocent jokes, of this naive laughter—of all this evangelical purity of heart, of this childishness of spirit of angels in the flesh, ceaselessly gazing upon the face of their Heavenly Father.... There she is—great old Russia!

These poor villages which stand
Amidst a nature sparse, austere—
O beloved Russian land,
Long to pine and persevere!

The foreigner's disdainful gaze
Will never understand nor see
The light that shines in secret rays
Upon your bare humility

Dear native land! While carrying
The Cross and struggling to pass through,
In slavish image Heaven's King
Has walked across you, blessing you.

—Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev

3. A PROPHETIC DREAM

March 19, 1910

Yesterday was a year since the repose of Schema-abbot Mark.* When before his repose I had occasion to have a conversation with him on events and signs of the times, the great Elder said to me, "How few there are that understand their true significance!"

In the past year it seems that the ranks of "those who understand" have been thinning out even more—not only in the world, but even in the holy monasteries.

Fr. Nektary is still in the infirmary. Today I again dropped by to visit him. I asked about his dream.

"It lasted almost all night," said Fr. Nektary, and he revealed it to me in general terms. "It would take too long to tell it to you in all its details. Here's the main part: I saw a huge field, and on this field a terrible battle was going on between innumerable hordes of apostates and a small army of Christians. All the apostates were superbly armed and were directing the battle according to all the rules of military science; but the Christians were unarmed. At least, I saw no weapons with them. To my horror, the outcome of this unequal battle could already be foreseen. The moment of the final triumph of the apostatic hordes was approaching, since there were already almost no Christians left. The festively dressed crowds of apostates, along with their women and children, were exulting and celebrating their victory.... Abruptly, an insignificant (as far as numbers) group of Christians, among whom I saw both

* An ascetic of Optina, born in 1841, who entered the brotherhood in 1855. He was an ardent disciple of Elder Moses (Putilov). He was appointed abbot of the St. George Meshchovsk Monastery in 1869. He retired in 1879 and was sent to the St. Paphnutius of Borovsk Monastery. He returned to Optina in 1882 and was secretly tonsured in the schema a few years before his repose.

women and children, carried out a sudden attack on the opponents of God, and in one instant the whole enormous field was covered with the corpses of the godless army. Its whole countless throng appeared to have been slaughtered—and furthermore, to my extreme astonishment, without the help of any kind of weapons. And I asked a Christian soldier that was standing near me, 'How were you able to overcome this countless host?'

"'God helped!'—such was the answer.

"'But by what means?' I asked. 'After all, you didn't even have any weapons.'

"'With whatever came to hand,' the soldier replied to me. With this my dream ended."

I heard this strange and remarkable tale today from the unlying and grace-filled lips of the priest of God, Fr. Nektary, a hieromonk of Optina Monastery. Fr. Nektary saw this dream on the night of the 16th to the 17th of March, 1910.

How should this dream be understood? Does it represent the victory of Orthodox Russia over the apostate world and the extension of God's favor to the sinful earth, or is it the manifestation of a herald of the final triumph of Christ's small flock over the last great apostasy, when the lawless antichrist will appear, *whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of His mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming* (II Thess. 2:8)? We shall see, if we live that long. But this dream was not by chance, and is consoling in both one and the other interpretation.

Bishop Benjamin, shortly after his visit with Elder Nektary.

3

The Sermon

METROPOLITAN BENJAMIN FEDCHENKOV*

*Bishop Benjamin, while having his see in Paris, was very close to Ivan M. Kontzevitch and his wife, who took part in his publishing activities, typesetting his journal and his book on St. Seraphim, which they considered a masterpiece. They even collaborated in its writing. Fedchenkov, according to their memoirs, was a compulsive personality who in his youth had gone against his mother's wishes to become a monk. For disobeying her, she cursed him, and this hung over his life and gave him no peace. When he encountered the young theology student Kontzevitch, and learned that he was in contact with Elder Nektary through his correspondence with his (Kontzevitch's) mother, he piled questions onto Elder Nektary. This evoked the correspondence that gave us the letters of Alexandra Kontzevitch (in monasticism Nun Nektaria) presented in Part I of this book.**

* Metropolitan Benjamin was a close devotee of Metropolitan Evlogy of Paris before the revolution and emigrated with him through the Crimea on the last ship when the White Army was defeated. On that ship were four hierarchs: Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky), Metropolitan Platon (later of America), Archbishop Theophan of Poltava (later of Bulgaria and France), and the youngest of them all, Bishop Benjamin, who acted as secretary at the first council of Russian hierarchs who found themselves outside of Russia. On that ship, on the day of the commemoration of Archangel Michael, they held their first meeting, dividing the diaspora into

I ENTERED THROUGH the gates over the bell tower into the courtyard of the Skete. I was pleasantly struck by the multitude of flowers, which were well cared for. To the left a narrow little path led to the skete Superior, Fr. Theodosius. He was the "boss" here, but was subject to the Abbot of the Monastery, as were all the others. He was a tall man, already with streaks of gray, and was rather stout. We became acquainted. I immediately asked his blessing to go and confess to the Elder, Fr. Nektary.

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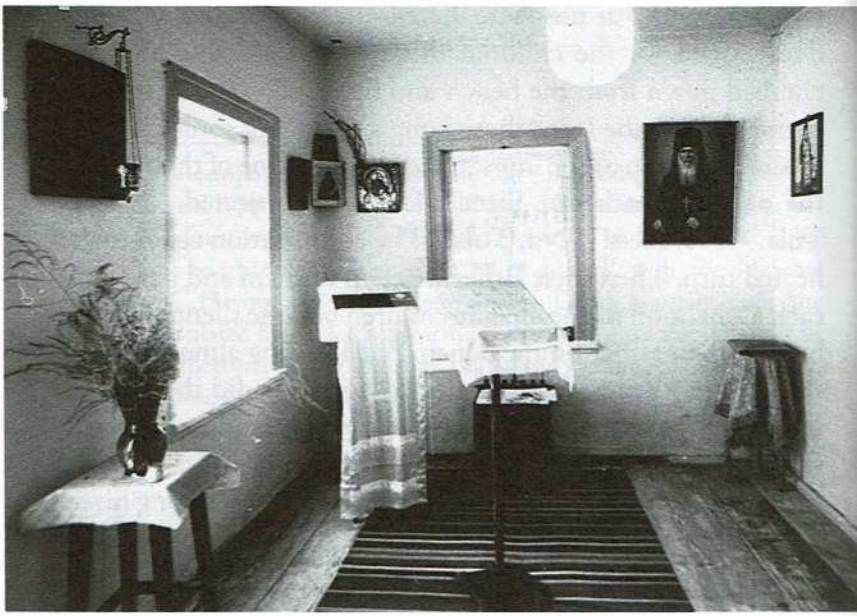
four parts: Metropolitan Anthony would have his headquarters in Serbia, Metropolitan Platon in America, Archbishop Theophan in Bulgaria, and Bishop Benjamin would assist Metropolitan Evlogy in France. The latter was faithful to that council until he allied himself with the Moscow Patriarchate. Having accepted Metropolitan Evlogy's submission, the soviet-manipulated hierarchs in Moscow wished to spread the influence of communist doctrines through Russian clergy, and summoned Metropolitan Evlogy to Moscow in order to put their own man in Paris. Sensing that he had made a wrong move, Metropolitan Evlogy refused to leave Paris. But his devoted vicar, Bishop Benjamin, felt unable to disobey and thus break fidelity with the Moscow Patriarchate, and he remained faithful to Moscow while remaining in Paris. Thus a schism between these two bishops took place in France. As a reward for being faithful, the Moscow Church made Bishop Benjamin an exarch and sent him even to America, as a representative of the Moscow Patriarchate, the "Soviet Church." In spite of his charm and eloquence he was not well-received anywhere, being marred as a "red bishop." This was quite unfortunate, since Metropolitan Benjamin was not a politician, but rather a writer and a devoted promoter of the Patristic understanding of sanctity. As a "total failure," in a personal dilemma, he was finally summoned to Russia, where he spent his last years in retirement in the Pskov Caves Monastery. There he wrote his memoirs, which are the best testament to his literary talent. But his best work was his study of St. John of Kronstadt's teaching on Divine Liturgy, entitled *Heaven on Earth* (Paris, 1939), written in France and serialized in his diocesan magazine. This book was typeset by Ivan and Helen Kontzevitch, who revered Bishop Benjamin and understood him for what he really was.

When I entered the reception room, four people were already sitting there: one novice, and a merchant with two little boys, about nine or ten years old. As children do, they were constantly talking merrily about something or other and quietly whispering and swinging their legs while sitting on the bench. When their conversation became loud, their father told them to be quiet. And we adults were quiet, too: just as in church, there was a reverent atmosphere here—the holy Elder was next door.... But for the children this was unendurable and they climbed down from the bench and began to examine the icon corner. Beside the icons there hung a picture of some city. The special attention of the imps rested upon it. One of them said to the other, "That's our Elets." The other objected, "No, it's Tula." "No, Elets!" "No, Tula!" The conversation again took a heated turn. Then their father went up to them and gave them each a smack on the head. The children became silent and came back to their father on the bench. But I, sitting almost beneath the picture, then became interested: for what did the tots suffer—for Tula or for Elets? It turned out that under the picture was the inscription: "The Holy City of Jerusalem."

I don't know why the father came and brought along his little children, and it seemed a sin to ask. We were all waiting for the Elder to come out as for confession in church. And people in church do not speak, nor do they ask about confessions. Each of us thought about himself....

We waited ten minutes more in silence. The Elder was evidently busy with someone in the other half of the house. Then the door from his cell into the reception room opened inaudibly and he walked in ... no, he didn't walk in, but sort of floated in quietly....In a dark podrasnik, girded with a wide belt, in a soft kamilavka, Fr. Nektary walked straight to the front corner where the icons were. He crossed himself very slowly and properly....It seemed to me as if he were carrying some kind of sacred



Elder Nektary's cell in Optina Skete as it looks today. It is preserved so as to look just as it did during the time of Elders Ambrose, Joseph and Nektary.

cup, filled with a precious liquid, and he was exceedingly careful that not one drop be spilled from it. And then the thought came to me: the saints preserve in themselves the grace of God and fear to disturb it by any kind of irreverent movement of soul—by haste, false human kindness, etc. Fr. Nektary gazed within at all times, standing in his heart before God. Bishop Theophan the Recluse also advises this: "Sitting or walking, or doing anything, be constantly before the face of God." He had a pure pink face; he was short of stature and his hair was streaked with gray. His build was fine and thin. His head was inclined slightly downwards. His eyes were half-closed.

We all arose.... He crossed himself three more times before the icons and walked up to the novice. The latter bowed to his feet, and stood, not on both knees, but on only one, probably being ashamed out of vainglory to do this in front of outside witnesses. This was not concealed from the Elder and he calmly, but firmly, said to him: "Stand on the other knee, too!" The novice obeyed, and they conversed about something quietly. Then, having received a blessing, the novice left.

Fr. Nektary went up to the father and his children, blessed them, and also talked with them ... I don't know about what. And I didn't listen; it would have been a sin to eavesdrop. I thought about myself. All of the Elder's conduct made a reverent impression upon me, as occurs in church before holy objects, before an icon, before Confession, before Communion.

Having dismissed the lay people, the Elder came up to me, the last one. Either I had been recommended to him here as the rector of the seminary, or I had previously talked about this to his cell-attendant, but he knew that I was an archimandrite. I immediately requested that he receive me for Confession.

"No, I can't confess you," he responded; "you're a learned man. Go to our skete Superior, Fr. Theodosius—he's educated."

That was a bitter thing for me to hear—did it mean that I was unworthy to confess to the holy Elder? I began to defend myself, saying that our education has no importance. But Fr. Nektary stood his ground and again repeated his advice—to go across the road, to the left, to Fr. Theodosius. It was useless to argue and I, with great sadness, took leave of the Elder and walked out the door.

I came to the skete Superior and told him of the Elder's refusal to confess me, and conveyed his advice to go for this to him—to the educated Fr. Theodosius.

"Well, what kind of an educated man am I?" he calmly responded. "I finished high school and no more. And what kind of confessor? True, when the Elders have a lot of people, even I receive some. But after all, what do you think I say to them? It's mostly from the books of our own Elders or from the Holy Fathers—I read something out of them and then tell them. Now Fr. Nektary—he's an elder by grace and from his own experience. No, you go to him and say that I bless him to confess you."

I took leave of him and went back to the "hut." The cell-attendant reported everything to the Elder from my words, and the latter requested that I come into his cell.

"Well, how nice, glory be to God," said the Elder with perfect calmness, as if he had not refused earlier. Obedience to one's seniors in a monastery is essential even for elders—perhaps, even in the first order, as a sacred deed and example to others.

And the confession began.... Unfortunately I now remember absolutely nothing about it. The only thing that remains is that afterwards we became just like relatives in soul. As a remembrance he gave me a small icon made of cypress with a carved depiction of the Crucifixion inside.

The Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God arrived. At about eleven in the morning on the eve of the Feast Fr.

Theodotus, the monk in charge of the outward order of the monastery, came to see me. He was somewhat portly, with some gray in his dark hair and beard, and was calm and amiable; he brought tranquility with him. Having said the prayer and greeted me, he at first inquired about my health and general state. He was in a good mood. "What fine weather we have now." (It had been a calm, cloudless, sunny day.) I thought—this is a lead-in, just like in the world, between worldly people. I waited further: monks do not go to others' cells for no reason. And in fact, Fr. Theodotus quickly came to the point: "Your Reverence! The Abbot requests that tomorrow, at the late Liturgy, you give a sermon."

This suggestion was completely unexpected for me. In the world I had given a fair number of sermons, talks and lessons. I had become spiritually weary from loquacity; thus, living in a monastery, I wished to rest from teaching in tranquility, solitude and silence. And in fact I had been resting. And all of a sudden, preach here?

"No, no!" my soul protested, "I can't, Batiushka!" And a long argument began between us.

"But why not, your Reverence?"

"Well, what am I going to teach you in the Monastery?! You are true monks, but I live in the world; what kind of monk am I? No—don't ask in vain."

But it appeared that it would not be easy to make Fr. Theodotus abandon the mission given him by the Abbot.

"And how is it that other learned monks have lived with us over there [in the monastery]"—he began to name them—"and didn't they give sermons?"

"That's not my business," I dismissed his objection. "I'm speaking about myself, that I can't teach you monks. What unique thing can I tell you? At your services everything is read according to the monastic rule, as well as the Lives of Saints

from the Prologue; and you also have the teachings from the works of the Holy Fathers. What could be better?"

"Be that as it may—it's profitable for us to hear a live oral sermon," insisted Fr. Theodotus.

"The Holy Fathers are always alive," I objected. "No, really, Batiushka—don't ask; this is hard for me. Explain it to the Abbot."

"But, you know, the Abbot blessed me to ask you to preach."

Seeing that none of my persuasion could have any effect upon the emissary, I remembered Elder Nektary. "There's someone who can rescue me from unexpected trouble," I thought, "And I confessed to him; he knows my sinful soul and he'll sooner understand my refusal on account of my unworthiness. And the word of the Elder is powerful in the Monastery."

"I'll ask Fr. Nektary," I said. "Good, good!" agreed Fr. Theodotus instantly. And with these words he began to say goodbye to me. There was even time—they had begun to ring the small bell in the Monastery for lunch. Then Fr. Theodotus left, and I set out for the Elder's "hut." There was no one in the reception room. At my knock Fr. Melchisedek came out; he was short, wore the usual soft kamilavka, and had a sparse youthful beard and a kind face. I explained my business and added, "I have no need to bother the Elder myself; he's busy with others. Just ask his advice. And ask him to bless me not to preach."

I had faith in such an answer from the Elder. It seemed to me that I was acting well, humbly. The cell-attendant, having heard me out, went behind the door. He returned almost immediately. "Fr. Nektary asks you to go in to see him."

I went in. We kissed one another's hands. He offered me a seat and, not questioning me further about anything, said the following words, which will be engraved in my memory until death:

"Batiushka," he said to me quietly, but with extraordinary firmness and authority, "take this advice for your whole life: if your superiors or those senior to you suggest something to you, then no matter how difficult or lofty it may seem to you, don't refuse. For the sake of obedience, God will help!"

Then he turned to the window and, pointing to nature, said, "Look! What beauty: the sun, the sky, the stars, trees, flowers.... And you know—there wasn't a thing before. Not ... a ... thing!" He repeated this slowly, extending his hand from left to right. "And God created such beauty out of nothing. So it is with man—when he sincerely comes to an awareness of the fact that he's nothing, then God begins to make something great out of him."

I began to weep. Then Fr. Nektary commanded me to pray thus: "O Lord, grant me Thy grace!" "A cloud will come over you, and you'll pray, 'Give me grace!' and the Lord will carry the cloud by."—and he moved his hand from left to right. Fr. Nektary continued his talk, for some reason telling me a story from the life of Patriarch Nikon, when he had been condemned and was living in exile, mourning over himself. I don't remember the details about Patriarch Nikon now; but the "advice for my whole life" I am still trying to fulfill....

The question of the sermon was resolved; I had to be obedient to the Abbot and speak the next day. I became calm and left. Normally the question of a topic and the presentation of a sermon posed no difficulty for me, but this time I was unable to find the needed theme right up to the All-night Vigil. And towards the end of the canon in Matins, the words addressed to the Theotokos remained in my mind and heart: "Forget not thy kin, O Lady!" We people are her kin according to the flesh. She is from our human race. And though she became the Mother of the Son of God, the Theotokos, we, as her relatives, still remain her close ones. And therefore we

dare to hope in her defence of us before God, even though we are her poor, sinful relatives.... The thoughts flowed, flowed in streams.... I was reminded of the example from the life of St. Tikhon of Zadonsk about the sinful superior of a monastery, how he was pardoned and even resurrected by the Lord: "By the prayers of My Mother I return you to life for repentance," he heard the voice of the Savior saying as his soul descended to the earth. And this superior, being at times possessed by a lack of sobriety, for the rest of his days had the habit of reading the Akathist to the Mother of God.

On the day of Dormition I served the early Liturgy in a different church.... And suddenly the desire burned within me to give a sermon here, too. But since this would have been self-will, I restrained myself. How crafty temptations can be!

At the late Liturgy I gave the prepared sermon, and it was, in fact, successful. In the church, besides the monks, there were many lay worshippers as well. All listened with deep attention.

After the service I was descending the steps of the portico. Suddenly two monks, whom I had condemned in my heart, came running up to me; and in front of all the people joyfully bowed at my feet, thanking me for the sermon....

But my "glory" did not end with this. When I returned to the Skete, the holy Fr. Kuksha met me on the porch of our little house: "There, well said, well said! You know, the hierarch Macarius was with us in Kaluga; he also gave fi–ine sermons!" I was silent. With that, my conversation with him ended.

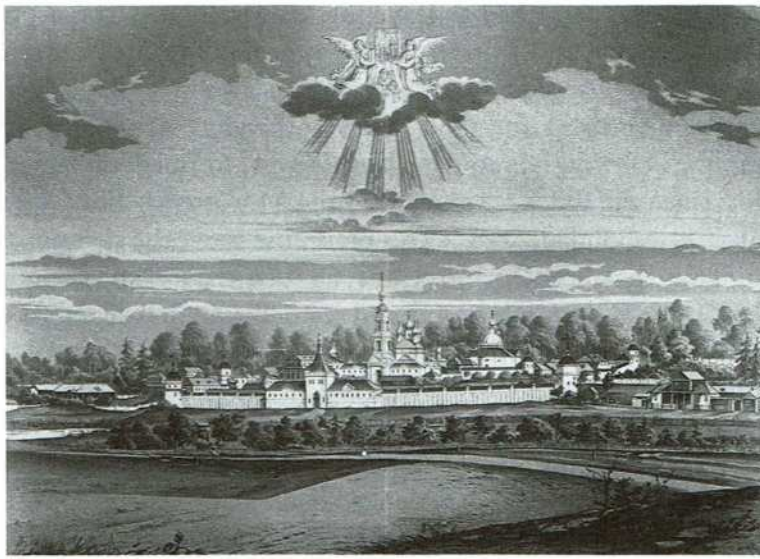
After a little while a whole group of novices came from the Monastery and began to ask me: "Batiushka, let's go take a walk through the woods and talk—you gave us such a good sermon."

"Uh-oh!" I thought to myself, "they're already proposing to make you into a teacher? And yesterday you considered yourself unworthy even to speak?! No, no. Walk away from temptation." And I declined their request....

The next day I had to leave the Monastery to serve at the Tver seminary, and I first went to say farewell to Fr. Nektary. Meeting me, he said with quiet approval, "You see, Batiushka, you were obedient and God gave you the grace to give a good homily." Obviously, someone had already informed him about this, since the Elder never went to the Monastery. "For God's sake," I responded, "don't you praise me too—the demon of vainglory has been torturing me for two days even without that." The Elder understood and immediately fell silent. We took leave of one another.

From him I went across the road to the skete Superior, Fr. Theodosius. He asked me how I felt, and in what frame of mind I was departing. I sincerely thanked him for all that was beautiful that I had seen and experienced here. But I added, "But in my heart there remains a heavy feeling of my own unworthiness." It seemed to me that I had spoken sincerely and had said nothing bad, and that the recognition of my unworthiness represented humility. "What, what?" he asked. "Repeat that, repeat that!" I repeated it. He became serious and replied, "This is not humility, your Reverence, this is a temptation of the enemy, despondency. People leave us, by God's mercy, with joy—and are you leaving with a burden? No, this is wrong, wrong. The enemy wants to spoil the fruit of your stay here. Cast him out. And give thanks to God. Go with peace! May the grace of God be with you."

I said farewell. My soul became peaceful. How spiritually experienced they are! And we, so-called "highly-educated monks," are unable to come to a correct understanding ourselves.... It's not without reason that our people go, not to us, but to them—to "simpletons," who are, however, wise and instructed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles were fishermen, but they subdued the whole world and conquered the "educated ones." *We see learned orators become voiceless as fish,* as



General view of Optina Monastery. Lithograph from 1876.

it is truly said in the Akathist, in comparison with the Christian preaching of these fishermen.

And now our "learnedness" was disgraced yet once more. When I came to the railway station in Kozelsk, while waiting for the train I sat down at a table. Opposite me was some lowly peasant with a pointed beard. After a short silence he turned to me rather seriously: "Father, was it you who gave the sermon at the Monastery?"

"Yes, it was I."

"Lord save you! But you know—I really thought that grace had altogether flown away from you learned ones."

"Why so?"

"Well you see, I had become an atheist at one time, but was tormented. And I began to turn to you learned ones. I even spoke with bishops, but they didn't help. But then I came here

and these simpletons set me on the path. Lord, save them! But now I see that even in you learned ones there's still a living Spirit, as the Savior said, *The wind bloweth where it listeth* (John 3:8)."

Our train soon rode up. Two women of the intelligentsia went up the steps of the second class car before me. I entered after them. They addressed me very tactfully with words of gratitude for the previous day's sermon. It seemed that these were two noblewomen who had come from afar on a pilgrimage to Optina and had heard my sermon. And the thought came to me that these "learned ones" were no worse—were even better, more humble—than the former atheist.... Yes, the Spirit of God looks neither at learnedness nor at simplicity, neither at wealth nor poverty, but only at the human heart; and if it is fit, then He will live and breathe there....

The gardens of Optina today, much as they looked when Bykov came to see the Elders.

4

Conversion of a Spiritist

VLADIMIR P. BYKOV*

*Vladimir Bykov** was converted almost instantly from a being a leader in the spiritist movement in Russia to being a traditional Orthodox leader. He captured the fervency of his conversion in the pages of his major work,* Calm Havens for the Respite of a Suffering Soul. *Had it not been for Elder Nektary's clairvoyant desire to convert the tormented soul of Bykov into an obedient son of the Orthodox Church, the* Prima Vita *of Elder Nektary would not have been written. Bykov's book converted many people at the time of the outbreak of the revolution, turning people to God so that they would revolt against the devil—the first revolutionary.*

At the present time the St. John the Forerunner Skete of Optina Monastery serves as the central point for pilgrims to Optina. And indeed, both by its outward appearance and by its inner order, this holy place is in truth the beauty of all Russia.

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* From *Calm Havens for the Respite of a Suffering Soul.*

**Vladimir P. Bykov (†1924 or 1925) was the editor of one of the most influential spiritist journals in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century—"The Spiritist." His conversion began with New Martyr Schema-abbess Sophia (Grineva), who directed him to Optina, where he had soul-saving conversations with Elders Theodosius, Anatole (Potapov) and Nektary. He subsequently became a priest in Moscow and was martyred.

It is sufficient to exit the Monastery onto that enchanting little road that leads to the Skete for your soul to be embraced by an exceptional feeling. Before you there unfolds from both sides a wondrous, dense alley of pines, and you instantly sense that you are passing into a completely different world. There is an unusually striking quietness. A holy stillness in the most exact sense of the word. Many, I am convinced, have observed such a stillness nowhere else.

Fruit trees stand evenly along both sides, at the beginning of the alley. If you have come in the second half of July, your gaze will light upon an extraordinary abundance of apples and other fruits. If you have come in the early spring, you will be walking under the shade of an unearthly garden, blanketed with the white flowers of the fruit trees.

Finally, seemingly imperceptibly, this alley joins itself to an opening in the thickly wooded forest, with its bogatyr [giant] trees gracefully stretching forth their tips; like the guardian-giants of good old times they peacefully admit you to the Skete. Here and there, in the profound stillness, with an obviously exceptional reverence, there extend long lines of pilgrims wending their way towards the Elders.

It goes without saying that one can walk four hundred yards, the distance between the Monastery and the Skete, very quickly. And you regret that this wonderful road could not grow to four hundred miles.

Before you, on the right, there first comes into view the well dedicated to St. Ambrose of Milan. Twice a day the skete-dwellers come out here through the skete gates with small earthen jugs, obviously for water for their morning and evening tea.

A few steps more, and before your eyes appear the holy gates of the St. John the Forerunner Skete, along both sides of which you see two small houses, with small porches extending

outwards. Through their doors, almost without interruption, the pilgrims who have come enter and leave.

By the cell on the right, on a long bench beside the entrance, and occasionally on the porch steps, a large group sits, awaiting their turn to enter the cell.

These two small houses are the cells of the Elders. Free access to them from outside the Skete is for women alone. Men go in to see the Elders through the holy gates, through an inside entrance.

If you look in the direction of the forest, away from the right-hand cell, you will see, in nice clear weather, a most heterogenous crowd of people waiting for their turn to enter the cell. A long bench is also located on this side. The main body of pilgrims gravitates towards the cell on the right.

Such a multitude of people at the right-hand cell is explained by the fact that in this cell, for many consecutive years, there dwelt two great Elders—Ambrose and Joseph.

This spot before the holy gates of the Skete is possessed of astounding qualities.

Besides my own experiences by these holy walls—when I spent entire days sitting here filled with a feeling of great reverence towards those who live behind the walls of this monastic habitation, and in particular towards those who live in these two whitewashed, clean little houses at the gate—I know a great many people who have come here to this marvelous, holy, silent stillness. They came not to rest, but to completely forget about everything they had left behind, far away, beyond this wondrous forest, beyond this wondrous road, in the corruptible world with all its cares.

Here a man experiences a unique process of inner soothing and self-analysis. It seems to me that here, for the first time, from those who dwell in this place, they come to discern "their own self," their innermost "I"; and here, right by these holy

cells at the threshold of these majestic gates, is accomplished the great process of the renewal of those souls. Here they abandon forever their former disfigured, hideous, repulsive "I," and leave as totally different people.

I don't know why, but in this place, by the walls of this Skete, the great evangelical fact of the rebirth of Zaccheus became comprehensible to me. Only here did I come to understand what an enormous role—in human life in general, and in Orthodoxy in particular—is played by the great ascetics, righteous ones and saints.

Not only the prayers for the sinful world of these saints, these ascetics, these bright luminaries that burn before our very eyes with the flame of Divine truth; not only their great significance as living illustrations of the possibility of fulfilling in life the Gospel truths of the Divine Savior of the world; not only they themselves, but even their snug nooks, their huts, their monasteries—which illustrate both their manner of life and their views and ways—are dear and precious, by virtue of the fact that, in their presence, at those places where the great ascetics sojourned, we are instantly blinded, as by a bright mirror, by such a radiant light that, all at once, against its background, are projected all our negative aspects, all our shortcomings, all our disgrace and all of the unsightliness of our inner attachments to the world and its lusts.

It is like Zaccheus, who climbed the tree out of simple curiosity, as soon as he saw the Divine Savior of the world, from Whom he needed nothing, toward Whom he was attracted only by rumors of His great sanctity, of His unearthly truth. He was drawn to Him only by the human desire to marvel with human astonishment, to venerate with the veneration of the masses; and finally, simply to understand for himself Who He was, What He was. And this turned out absolutely unexpectedly for Zaccheus. It was enough for Zaccheus to see this

humility incarnate, this ideal meekness; and against the background of the bright light emanating from Him, he saw in an instant all his imperfections, all his sinfulness. Astonished at all this he cried out at once: *Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold. And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house* (Luke 19:8-9). It was just such a psychological process that took place at the skete walls in the souls of Gogol, Kireyevsky, and others.

As soon as I learned of Optina; when the Lord had helped me, the unworthy one—here, under the shelter of the Monastery of these Elder-intercessors—to see the holy truth and the meaning of life; when over the course of the few days of my stay here, of my many contemplative hours by these hut-cells of the Elders—not large according to their size, but unlimited according to the spirituality contained within them—I had occasion to see for myself what had never been revealed to my eyes before; to repent within myself for the most minute and most coarse sinful deeds—then did I, all at once, solve the psychological enigma that had stood before my mind—a strange, inexplicable state, even during the time of my unbelief, which would always engulf my soul when reading exalted passages of the Divine word; in the presence of the touching prayer of someone encountered in a church or chapel; when visiting the dwellings of such great ascetics of the spirit as Seraphim of Sarov the wonderworker; or at encounters with great monks who were filled with amazing meekness, with a superhuman humility and love.

Immediately upon my arrival, as soon as I had learned that there were three Elders in Optina—Fr. Theodosius (the skete-Superior), Fr. Nektary, and Fr. Anatole—I decided, first of all, to go and see Fr. Theodosius.

As I have said above, the reception of men takes place inside the Skete. I approached the holy gates and opened them, and there appeared before me the marvelous picture of a lush garden, abundant with flowers that reached to a man's full height and filled the air with such a scent that one could forget, in the literal sense of the word, all that surrounded him.

Directly opposite me there stood a small church, made of wood, but of extraordinarily singular architecture—this is the skete Church of the Forerunner, the distinguishing feature of which consists in the fact that everything inside is purposely made of wood and, as we are told, by the monks themselves. Besides that, all the icons in the church have no rizas; all that is painted is openly visible.

Along the path from the holy gates to the skete church, at its beginning, there is on one side—on the right—Elder Nektary's cell, and on the left the cell of the skete Superior, Elder Theodosius. Heading for the latter, I rang the bell. The cell-attendant came out and bade me enter. When I went in, a long, very clean corridor was before me, hung with all kinds of texts from the Holy Scriptures—instructions to monks and visiting lay people. On the right was a large room. I entered it. The front corner was full of icons; on the left, by the wall, was a large leather couch with portraits over it: a large one of Elder Ambrose lying in bed, then one of Elder Barsanuphius, and further on of various bishops and, in general, of persons well known in Optina and other monasteries. After a short space of time, Elder Theodosius came in—a tall man with very thick hair with large streaks of gray, with a small beard and very attractive, deep, pensive eyes.

It is essential to note that ... from false apprehension, and thinking that, for me, the question about spiritism was closed, I approached the Elder without saying anything about my activity in spiritism, with questions closely bound up with my literary and lecturing activities.

And here, as had happened with Elder Gerasim,* I again personally observed the amazing power of the spiritual experience and foresight of the Elders.

Before me was a man of enormous spiritual experience and broad education. Thanking me for my work in the popularization of Christian moral ethics, he gave me a remarkable amount of valuable advice. He supplied me with instructions which, as I now see, were so essential, so necessary for me.

But when I proposed a whole series of questions to him which touched upon the reorganization of my personal life, it felt—at least such an impression has remained with me—as if the Elder, by some kind of inner impulse, penetrated into my past, evaluated my present and, giving me advice for the future, from a feeling of tact, and perhaps also of pity, did not wish to touch upon the painful questions of my existence. Giving me his blessing, he suggested that I visit Elder Nektary.

At first I was about to decline to do this—in the first place, out of fear of disrupting the impression which had been created in me by this conversation; and in the second place, ... by virtue of the explanation ... of the Holy Fathers Barsanuphius the Great and John, that one ought not to ask elders a second time about the same thing, nor ought one to go from one elder to another; for, in the first case the elder undoubtedly speaks intuitively from on high, but the second case is a matter of common sense.

This was even more obvious from my talk with Elder Theodosius, by his replies to my extremely concise questions, to which, although I painstakingly circumvented everything that touched upon my former shameful activity, this broadly mature mind, illumined by the grace of Christ, gave me that which could not be given by a simple man.

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* A clairvoyant Elder—the founder of the St. Sergius Skete in the Kaluga province.

And I was appeased, amazed, and astonished.

But it seemed that Elder Theodosius even insisted that I, without fail, visit Elder Nektary.

"You know, if you just go right to the doorstep of this great, but humble, Elder, he won't give you anything besides God's blessing."

I decided to fulfill what the Elder insisted upon. Crossing the road, I headed for Elder Nektary's doorway. I rang. The door instantly opened before me. When I entered the corridor I saw a number of men sitting and standing, obviously waiting for the Elder.

It is essential to note that at that time there had been a particularly large influx of visitors to see the Elder and so, as they say, it was packed.

The cell-attendant led me to a separate room, where I sat and waited for Elder Nektary. I did not wait very long. After some ten or fifteen minutes I heard everyone in the front room begin to stir. I also stood up, approached the door, and saw the Elder heading towards me; he was a man of short stature, with a klobuk on his head of the type in which Elder Ambrose is usually pictured. This was Elder Nektary.

Having blessed everyone, he came up to me, and with the words, "Come in, please," he led me into his cell.

The furnishings were exactly like those in Elder Theodosius' cell—icons, portraits and a large antique couch on the right that was falling apart and had a covering over it. Not far from it was a small table upon which lay several volumes of spiritual literature. Elder Nektary seated me on the couch and sat beside me in an armchair.

By his appearance, one could not ascribe many years to Elder Nektary. His small beard is almost unchanged from its natural color. The Elder's eyes make a strange impression on the visitor, especially during a conversation. They are quite

small; it is likely that he suffers from severe nearsightedness, but it often seems to you, particularly when he is concentratedly pondering something, that he lapses into a state of obliviousness. At least, such was my personal impression.

While Elder Theodosius appears to you to be a vivacious man, one who reacts with extraordinary speed to all of your personal tribulations, Fr. Nektary gives the impression of a man more phlegmatic, more calm and, if you like, more sluggish.

Since my visit with this Elder served for the final resolution of all my afflictions, I will attempt to reproduce, as precisely as possible, the sense of my conversation with him.

"From whence have you deigned to visit us?" Fr. Nektary began to speak slowly, quietly, calmly.

"From Moscow, dear Batiushka!"

"From Moscow?..."

At this point the Elder's cell-attendant gave him tea and white bread.

"Wouldn't you like to have a little cup of tea with me? Give us another glass!"—he turned to his cell-attendant, who was walking out.

I was at the point of refusing, saying that he needed to rest, and that I would not dare disturb his rest. But he evidently had no intention of dismissing me, and with the words, "Never mind, never mind, we'll have a talk," he moved the glass of tea that had been brought closer to me, broke the roll in two and began to carry on a conversation with me so simply, evenly and calmly, as if with an old acquaintance of his.

"Well, how are things with you in Moscow?" was his first question.

I, not knowing what to reply, came out with a high-sounding phrase: "Well, what can I tell you, Batiushka? Everyone is under mutual hypnosis."

"Yes, yes.... A terrible business, this hypnosis. There was a time when people were afraid of this practice—they fled from it ... but now it fascinates them ... they derive something useful from it...." And Fr. Nektary, using the most popular expressions, gave me a whole lecture, in the most exact sense of the word, on hypnotism, not digressing for one instant from the essence of this teaching in its latest research.

If this had been my second visit to the Elder, and if I had premeditatedly told him that I was a spiritist and occultist, and that I was interested, among other things, in hypnotism; then I, having heard such a speech, might have concluded with a calm soul that the Elder had been prepared for this question and even I, a man half his age, would not have blushed at this preparation.

..."And you know, the whole trouble is that this knowledge enters into our lives under cover, as if it's capable of benefitting humanity enormously," concluded Fr. Nektary.

At this point the door opened and his cell-attendant entered and announced, "Batiushka, they're waiting for you out there."

"All right, all right, right away," said the Elder; and then, waiting a bit, he turned to me confidentially and continued, "And an even more terrible passion, even more ruinous for the soul, and even for the body, is the passion of spiritism...."

If in that cell—in which a whole series of elder-ascetics had lived—a dry, metallic, deafening peal of thunder had resounded (you know, the kind that sometimes occurs on hot, stormy June days), it would not have made such an impression on me as had these words of the God-inspired Elder.

I felt as if a hot wave of blood had rushed to my face—and my heart, with terribly intense beats, began to inform my head, my arms, my legs, the couch, and, it even seemed, the Elder himself, of its existence. I became total attention itself. I was

frozen from surprise. And my intellect, which was accustomed to incongruities of a similar nature, taking into account all these physiological and psychological impulses which instantly made themselves felt at the Elder's first words, said to me, Listen—this is for you.

And indeed—this was for me.

The Elder continued, "O, what a ruinous, what a terrible thing this is! Satan himself even appears at spiritistic seances under the guise of great Christian teaching and—imperceptibly to a man—he, with the demonic flattery of the ancient serpent, leads him into such pits, into such labyrinths, from which he himself has neither the likelihood nor the power to extricate himself, nor can he even recognize that he is in such a predicament. He dominates the human mind and heart through this activity, accursed by God, to such an extent that what seems sinful and criminal to an undamaged mind, seems to a man that is poisoned by the venom of spiritism to be normal and natural...."

With lightning speed a whole series of my own deeds and the deeds of others who had given themselves over to this teaching arose in my mind, right in the midst of the Elder's last elucidation.

From the standpoint of a true, undamaged Christian, what could be a more criminal act than, for example (may many spiritists forgive me), the indulgence in such a terrible sin as adultery between spouses, and for one to leave another so as to cohabitate with a third? Those who are imbued with the satanic teaching in spiritism on the "reincarnation of souls," according to which a man appears on earth repeatedly, supposedly for the redemption of the sins of past lives, justify this clear violation of the Seventh Commandment—which is cemented by the Divine words of Christ, *What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder* (Matt. 19:6), and made law by the Creator

of the world Himself, on the first pages of the Bible: *Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh* (Gen. 2:24). They do this by an argument founded on nothing—that those who have become intimate were, in a former incarnation, husband and wife, and that the love that has blazed up between them now merely proves that they had not completed a task that had been assigned them in a past existence, and that they must complete it together now....

Or, what could be more unlawful from a Christian point of view—I know my colleagues in misfortune will not forgive me for this—than unmarried cohabitation? But it has been introduced almost as a dogma in a whole host of spiritist organizations, simply because eroticism is considered to be the most reliable stimulus for the manifestation of mediumistic abilities. And so on, and so on, without end.

"Indeed," continued the Elder, "you only have to stand a little closer and take a good look at many spiritists. First of all, some sort of imprint lies upon them, by which it becomes clear that these people are table-tappers. Then a terrible pride appears in them, and a purely satanic animosity towards all those who oppose them...."

And this is a correct and surprisingly accurate observation. Frightful malice, amazing intolerance and finally, pride—even well-known spiritist heresiarchs, and Kardek, the apostle of spiritism, say much concerning this, calling it one of the dreadful and pernicious characteristics of spiritist prophets (mediums). In fact, it would seem that this pride and malice alone could serve as the best proof that these teachings are from satan; for the word of God also points to these two qualities, and to malice in particular, as overt signs of the just-indicated source of their origin: *If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar* (I John 4:20); *Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer*

(I John 3:15); *But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes* (I John 2:11); *In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother* (I John 3:10). But alas—the spiritists themselves, like plague victims, do not wish to admit this.

Concerning the intolerance of spiritists, it is hardly necessary to speak. When I was denounced, albeit quite harshly, by a man who perhaps also suffered from intolerance, but who was also certainly zealous and sincere in his work, the well-known missionary I. E. Aivasov, I was ready, as they say, to annihilate him. Only now do I regard him with respect and appreciation, since by his harshness he gave me a push much closer to the truth. Furthermore, when the now-reposed S. D. Volkov-Davidov, under the pseudonym Serapion Volkovich, came forward to censure me (true, with a rather exaggerated denunciation) in his brochure, *Spiritism—Poison of the Intellect,* I gave him such a rebuke that now I am more than ashamed of it. Finally, when the famous missionary Fr. Cherkassov, in the journal, *The Rudder (Kormchi),* entered into the battle against the heresy being spread by me in a tactful and highly Christian manner—oh, how harshly I answered him and how dishonorably I defended satan! But meanwhile, before entering into the sphere of spiritism, I had been a very tactful and patient man in my relationships with people.

"And in this way, imperceptibly," the great clairvoyant Elder, slowly, with long pauses, continued his holy, accusatory discourse directed at me—precisely at me—"gradually, not noticing it himself, very subtly, since nowhere does satan operate more subtly than in spiritism—a man drifts away from God, from the Church. But notice—at the same time, the spirit of darkness, through his spirits, persists in sending the man whom

he has muddled to the churches of God, to have Pannikhidas, Molebens and Akathists served; has him receive the Holy Mysteries of Christ; and at the same time, little by little, he introduces thoughts into his head: 'You know, you could do all this yourself, in the surroundings of your own home, with great zeal, with great reverence, and even with great productivity in the sense of receiving the fulfillment of your requests!...'"

An account came to mind which I had heard more than once in Petersburg from extremely trustworthy sources, with information as to names and surnames, about three occultists and spiritualists. As regards clergy, they stood in absolute, diametrical opposition. But nevertheless, with their own priestly vestments, censers, crosses, Gospels and service books, they personally conducted various church services and even went from house to house serving Molebens.

"And to the extent that this man, who does not reflect on what he is doing, descends further and further into the abyss of his fall," continued Fr. Nektary, "he becomes more and more entangled in the intricate twists and mazes of the spirit of darkness, and from this the Lord begins to depart from him. He loses God's blessing. He is pursued by misfortunes. His well-being breaks down. Had he still been undamaged by satan, he would run for help to God, to the holy saints of God, to the Heavenly Queen, to the Holy Apostolic Church, to the priests—and they would help him by their holy prayers. But he goes with his afflictions to those very spirits—the demons—and these latter entangle him even more; they draw him yet further into the engulfing shadow of sin and damnation..."

Oh, how truthful these words were! The Elder, as if from a book, was reading the sorrowful pages of my life, and my recollections at this time only served to illustrate his words.

Yet even as everything was falling apart with me, everywhere and in everything, all at once, as if from a cornucopia of

misfortunes—I, instead of increasing my supplications to the Lord, intensified my contact with spirits. And how insidiously, how diplomatically these false friends and "protectors" endeavored to secure me in my wicked inclinations, saying that the flame of these trials had as their goal to perfect me to a greater degree, to further improve my soul so as to lead me closer to the Creator of the world and to recompense me with the good things of this world. They then proposed the kind of advice to me that destroyed my well-being even more; and when I sought a justification for these lies, they explained that this had happened, not because of them, but because of lower spirits who had begun to fear my spiritual growth. And all of this was reinforced by amazing phenomena of physical and psychic characteristics.

"Finally, the blessing of God completely withdraws from a man. The gangrene of his ruin begins to destructively influence his whole family. For no reason there begins a strange breakup of his family. The people closest and dearest to him leave him!..."

Chills ran up my spine. An agonizing coldness gripped my whole soul and body, for I sensed that I was standing at the threshold of this horrible, excruciating ordeal.

At that moment I was ready to throw myself at the Elder's feet, to shed copious tears upon his breast, to repent before him for everything and beg his help, but the door opened and in walked his cell-attendant again, and with obvious impatience in his voice he repeated, "Batiushka, you know there's a crowd of people out there. They're having a terrible time waiting for you." The Elder humbly and calmly said, "All right, all right, I'll be right there," and then he continued: "Finally, when with satan's help the unfortunate human soul reaches the very last degree of the tangled state he has brought upon himself, he either loses his sanity, becoming irresponsible in the most exact

sense of the word, or he commits suicide. Although spiritists say that there is no suicide among them, this is not true. The very first one to call upon spirits, King Saul, ended his life by suicide because he did not observe the words of the Lord and turned to sorcery (cf. I Chron. 10:13)."

And here is the living truth; here is the sacred truth: I personally know one spiritist from the south, a very cultured woman, with a broad education and occupying a prominent place in the world of education. Being captivated by spiritism, she at first received the most beautiful and profound revelations through thoughts, but later sent me for publication two whole volumes of a philosophical treatise written at the direction of a spirit, from which it followed that the devil and God are one being. Doubtless, the poor soul had become not quite normal.

In another case, a cossack officer, who occupied a good position both in society and in the service, went completely out of his mind after eight years of persistent contact with spirits, and died two years ago in one of Moscow's psychiatric hospitals.

The Elder's words about suicide due to spiritism also radiated profound truthfulness.... There are not a small number of such cases among spiritists though they, with particular care, conceal all such incidents, probably also under the influence of the spirit of darkness. They justify keeping this secret by the notion that "only the spiritistic teaching on suicide, consisting of the communications from beyond the grave of suicides themselves, can serve as a true counteraction to this evil which is spreading throughout the world; and that therefore, to speak of 'suicide within spiritism' would mean to destroy the only means of battle with this scourge of humanity."* Thus, when I began to take a closer and more dispassionate look at spiritistic teachings

* This fact testifies that spiritistic teachings contain within themselves a principle that annuls the power and mercy of God, and Christ's redeeming love towards humanity.

during the last three or four years, I personally had to record five instances of suicide among spiritists, one of which was the president of the Petersburg spiritist society, O. Y. Stano, who had worked for many years in the realm of spiritism.

The Elder then said, "In a word, when a man summons spirits who prophesy in the name of God, though the Lord does not send them, there is worked in him that which the Prophet Jeremiah once foretold: *By sword and famine shall those prophets be consumed. And the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of [the city] because of the famine and the sword ... for I will pour their wickedness upon them* (Jer. 14:15-16)."

After these words the Elder closed his eyes and quietly leaned his head upon his breast. I cannot even find an appropriate word now; I was in such a state, strange and incomprehensible to me. And it is not surprising—any man would likely have experienced such a state had his whole soul, all his secret thoughts and desires, been laid bare before his very eyes. The picture of his whole sad future would have been portrayed before him. This is especially true if you take into consideration the fact that I have not been able to recall much of what the Elder said to me over the course of three to four hours and that the conversation presented above is only a synopsis.

In short, there is no way that I can clearly, consciously say what I was going through, what I was thinking about during that short pause. I remember only one thing—that I instinctively had a premonition that this was not yet all; that there would yet be something "final," the "foremost," the "most emphatic" thing for me.

And I was not mistaken.

The Elder, not opening his eyes, in a kind of especially gentle, especially tender way, bent over towards me and, stroking me on the knee, he gently, gently, humbly, lovingly said:

"Leave it ... cast it all away. It's still not too late ... or else you might perish ... I feel so sorry for you...."

Great God! I shall never forget that moment, which so struck my soul and heart. I am unable to speak about it calmly, without tears, without trembling and emotion in my voice—no matter when, where, or with whom I recall this great moment of spiritual rebirth in my life....

If Saul, seeing the light of Christ, fell to the earth—Saul, who openly seized and gave over to prison those who confessed Christ; at whose approach people might have run and hid themselves—then that is how I ought to have felt; I, who in a perfidious manner spiritually robbed and murdered human souls, taking advantage of their trust, their thirst for truth; into whose open mouths, that anticipated wholesome dew from the fount of living water, I had slowly poured drops of horrible poison. How I must have felt in the presence of that unearthly light that illumined me and stunned my heart and soul, I leave it to each of you kind gentlemen and ladies to judge, since to attempt to transmit this in words would mean to distort this great and serious matter.

When I came to my senses, my first question to the Elder was, "What must I do?" The Elder quietly arose and said, "To this I will tell you what the Lord Jesus Christ told the possessed Gadarene whom He had healed: *Return to thine own house, and shew how great things God hath done unto thee* (Luke 8:39). Go and battle against him for whom you have worked. Energetically and diligently pull up those tares which you have sown. There will be much enmity against you, much evil, many snares of satan, especially from the camp you have left, and this is entirely understandable and natural. But go, don't be afraid ... don't be embarrassed.... Do what you have to do, no matter what lies in your path ... and may God bless you!..."

When I came out, to the obvious surprise of the cell-attendant and the visitors who were waiting for the Elder, I was already a different man. I had broken off with the past. Before me stood one task—quickly, as quickly as possible, to liquidate the past.

I sensed and knew, and even now I sense and know, that all my errors, all the delusions and sins of the past—no matter how I, with the Lord's help, try to destroy them—will, like weeds, be on my path for a long time to come, and will sometimes entangle my feet. They will crawl out onto the surface of my work against that which I served for many years, and they will hinder me in every way in my new activity.

I knew and I know that the father of these teachings, the spirit of darkness, through his army of unfortunate soldiers, will impede my service for the Truth with all his strength, will discredit me with my past sins and delusions. People will not soon apprehend the idea that this has been a horrible, tormenting school for me.

When I left the Skete, when its heavy gates shut behind me, I understood that now all that I needed had been given to me.

Oleg Kontzevitch, the future Bishop Nektary, at age 12.

5

Preserving a Boy for Optina Transmission

BISHOP NEKTARY KONTZEVITCH*

Vladimir Bykov's conversion in turn converted the Kontzevitch family. The eldest Kontzevitch son, Ivan, became the author of St. Nektary's Prima Vita, *and the second son, Oleg, became a direct follower of the Optina tradition. Oleg was preserved for monasticism by his mother as an obedience to Elder Nektary, who, upon seeing the ten-year-old boy, said that he would be "useful" in promoting and preserving the Optina spirit to the end of time. Oleg—the future Bishop Nektary—remained faithful to this calling throughout his entire life. These are a few incidents "pulled out" of him, almost on his deathbed, by his spiritual sons, monks of Platina.*

Bishop Nektary was born Oleg Mikhaelovich Kontzevitch in March of 1905. He was named after St. Oleg, prince of Briansk, whose territory was renowned as a seedbed of desert-dwelling ascetics in the late 18th century.

Oleg's father, Michael Ivanovich Kontzevitch, was from the city of Poltava in southern Russia, and came from a family

* Taken from *The Orthodox Word*, nos. 169 and 170.

of impoverished nobility. Michael graduated from the Department of Natural Sciences in Warsaw University, Poland, and then remained at the University as an instructor. He married and became the father of a family. In order to obtain better material conditions, he entered the Ministry of Finances and was transferred to the Baltic region as a tax inspector. Having a gifted nature, he advanced to the highest ranks. His high honors, however, brought with them risks. In 1905, he was standing and reading a report during a meeting in his office, being brightly illuminated by a lamp, when from the window opposite, overgrown by a grapevine, a shot rang out: a revolutionary had aimed at his head, but had missed him by a hair.

Michael's wife, Alexandra Ivanovna Lisenevskaya, was a Carpatho-Russian, the daughter of a judge. She graduated from secondary school in Warsaw and was married at a very young age. She was a born teacher and knew how to bring up children without punishments (unless a deliberately evil will should be revealed), making every question clear to them. Thus she was able from childhood to explain to her sons the harm of smoking, and they never smoked.

Oleg, the future Bishop Nektary, was born when his family was living in Kurlandia (southern Latvia) on the Baltic Sea, which was then part of the Russian Empire. He was the youngest of five children, and had two brothers and two sisters.

Oleg's father Michael grew homesick for his native Poltava, and at a convenient opportunity transferred to Mirgorod, a small town made famous by the great Russian writer and humorist N. Gogol. Later he was transferred to Kremenchug, and took his family there on a boat on the river Dnieper. Finally the family settled in the warm southwestern Russian city of Kharkov.

The oldest son, Ivan, was always the intellectual, studying mathematics first in Poltava and then at the University of Kiev.

In the period before the First World War the Russian intelligentsia was far from the Church, and Ivan was no exception. He turned to searching, supposing that in man there are hidden powers which demand development. He began to study yoga, though this was not to last long.

The second brother, Vladimir, was the darling of the family. He was two years younger than Ivan, but surpassed him both in his build and appearance and in his brilliant talents—he learned without any effort. He had an ideal personality, and there was no one who did not love him.

When the First World War broke out, Vladimir, out of patriotic feelings for Russia, joined the army. In the Carpathian Mountains, where his company was located, there was an enemy attack. It was necessary to cut the communications line in plain sight of the enemy companies. Lots were drawn to determine who would go to certain death. The lot did not fall to Vladimir, but, despite the officer's entreaty, he replaced one of the draftees and was killed. He was only nineteen years old. This occurred in Austria near Bochna on November 13, 1914.

The family's grief was indescribable. Although they were Orthodox, they were not very churchgoing and could find no peace in the face of the tragedy. Nothing could console Alexandra Ivanovna; it was as if she turned to stone. In order that she not be separated from Vladimir, it entered into her head to contact his spirit through mediums. Spiritism was then in high vogue in Russia, particularly amidst the upper classes. There was a popular magazine called *Rebus,* representing the fashionable "New Age" ideas of that time, and edited by a bright young man, Vladimir Bykov. Alexandra wrote a letter to Bykov inquiring whether there was a possibility of somehow contacting her dead son. After intense anticipation, an answer arrived. The children gathered in hope of soon having contact with their brother, and Alexandra read the letter

aloud. To their great surprise, Bykov wrote approximately the following:

> Dear Madam,
>
> I received your letter, and with great happiness I'm hastening to write you a reply. I fully understand your grief, and sympathize with you. And I have an answer for you, in order for you to benefit and have future contact with your son.
>
> Spiritism is demonic! Orthodox Christianity is your answer. I'm sending you my book, called *Calm Havens for the Respite of a Suffering Soul.* It is mostly about Optina Monastery. I have just converted from the demonic path to the only path whereby we may obtain a future life in heaven with those we love. I strongly urge you also to visit Optina.

This unexpected reply, at first glance, was disappointing. But then Alexandra began to read Bykov's book. Ivan volunteered to visit this hitherto unknown place, Optina, and then to inform his mother of what he found there.

It was the summer of 1915. Due to the War, there were no more shoes in the stores. Throwing off a characteristic feature of his life—to be always decently and neatly dressed—Ivan set off in bark shoes, as a peasant.

Ivan spent two months in Optina. His first impression was overwhelming.

In a letter to his mother from Optina, Ivan wrote: "All the monks here walk as if on tiptoe before God. The Elders are wonderful. Take the children and come to Optina at once."

The following summer, Alexandra packed her bags, and with both her daughters and her young son Oleg—who was then ten years old—went to Optina. They spent the rest of the summer in the Optina guesthouse, reading spiritual books, roaming the woods, picking mushrooms and berries, breathing in the country air of the fields of Optina, and above all visiting

The mother of Bishop Nektary, Alexandra Ivanovna Kontzevitch, in monasticism Nun Nektaria (†1942), with her two eldest sons at the turn of the century. At left, Ivan (†July 6, 1965 n.s.); at right, Vladimir (†Nov. 13, 1914).

and waiting whole days to have a talk with the Elders, Anatole (the Younger) and Nektary.

The impression that the Elders made upon Alexandra Kontzevitch was so strong that she dedicated the rest of her life in obedience to their spiritual instructions, ending her life as a tonsured nun, Nektaria.

That blissful summer of 1915 also determined the fate of Oleg for the rest of his life. The first time Alexandra went with Oleg to see Elder Nektary, the latter quietly and with deep concentration approached them. While blessing the young Oleg, he told the mother, "Put care into preserving your son. He'll be of use to us someday."

After saying this, the Elder turned around. There were two monks standing there, one named Macarius and the other Ambrose. The Elder said to them, "And you, honorable fathers, accept him then."

No words of the Elders were without mystical meaning: such was the general understanding among the people, both monks and pilgrims, who would approach the Elders for a blessing. Thus, to Alexandra, the words of Elder Nektary about Oleg meant a lifelong commitment from her: to protect, preserve and guard her son for monasticism and service to the Church and the Elders. Alexandra fulfilled this commitment with all her strength, and later passed it on to her eldest daughter Vera, who, until Oleg's very death, took care of him and guarded him with ascetic zeal.

The die was cast. Monasticism became the natural element for the young Oleg. His soul at once accepted this as from the hand of God. Deep in his heart he felt himself a monk of Optina, and for the rest of his life, through all kinds of changing circumstances, this feeling never left him.

In the years that followed, Alexandra and her children would spend their summers in Optina, and would also make

pilgrimages there during winter holidays. Years later, Bishop Nektary would describe to us unforgettable images of what it was like to be in Optina during winter. The guesthouse bell would ring in the deep of night, and he would awaken to go to Nocturns and Matins in church. It would be cold outside, dark, and overhead a starry sky. The church bell would be ringing while all the monks and pilgrims, like black silhouettes, crunching the huge mounds of newly fallen snow under their feet, would hasten to the church. The snow would be glistening in the moonlight. The dark figures of monks would seem to glide across the yard in their high monastic hats and cowls and their long, flowing black robes. Everyone would enter the dark, warm church, where multicolored lampadas would flicker before huge icons in golden rizas. In the middle of the church would stand the silhouette of a monk holding a small taper and reading the Six Psalms. "He would read rhythmically, without human emotions," Bishop Nektary recalled, "as if coming from another world." Bishop Nektary remembered how he loved this mysterious atmosphere, when the soul would soar somewhere far above the earth, in the vaults of the gigantic catholicon.

The young Oleg liked everything in Optina. Everything was holy for him; everything would bring contrition of heart and dispose one to prayer. During summer nights he would yearn to pray for a long time somewhere in the middle of the forest. Then still a child, he would attach to a tree a little paper icon of St. Seraphim praying on the rock,* and, kneeling before it in fervent prayer, he would shed copious tears. "I did so not really knowing why," he was to recall in later years. "My heart was longing to be in a state of prayer. I was in a prayerful exaltation. I prayed for the whole world, and an inexplicable sweetness would envelop my whole being. I guess my young soul

* St. Seraphim of Sarov prayed on a rock for a thousand days and nights.—ED.

reacted to the grace of Optina, which would form and nourish me in my old age."

The life of Alexandra and her children became that of a very church-oriented family, wherein the church calendar of feasts and fasts dictate the daily life of the true sons and daughters of Holy Russia. The family had absolute dedication to Elder Nektary, and literally lived from one visit to Optina to another.

Bishop Nektary would later recall many stories and anecdotes about Elder Nektary. Having taken them down from his lips, we recount some of them below:

Often the Kontzevitches would go to Elder Nektary in his reception room, where he would receive pilgrims. There they frequently had to wait a long time, until the Elder would come out and bless people. Usually it was like this: The door would open from the Elder's section, and the Elder would come slowly, with tiny steps and half-closed eyes. Turning to the icons, before which a lampada was lit, he would very slowly raise his hand and make the sign of the Cross, and pronounce in a singsong manner, "Help us, save us, have mercy on us and keep us, O God, by Thy grace." The people, in total silence and with reverence, would kneel, anticipating a blessing. He would approach each individual, moving slowly, and would imprint his blessing upon them with his right hand. Often he would say something to a person. To those who came frequently for blessings, he would sometimes say, "And now go have some tea." Then, shuffling slowly, he would turn and go away, leaving behind him a certain holy reverence, like a mysterious lingering fragrance.

Once the Elder came out in this way, raised his hand to make the sign of the Cross, and said, "Help us, save us, ..." then stopped at these words. He was silent for a while, and then, without finishing the sign of the Cross, turned around and

went to his cell. It turned out that the lampada was not lit. He was strict in this regard.

* * *

Once the young Oleg was present when the Elder was for some reason blessing the room with holy water. A black cat was sitting on the windowsill, and the Elder blessed it also. The cat, feeling the sprinkling of the water, jumped up and ran away. At this one of the Monastery's novices, who was standing nearby, ventured to make a "spiritual comment" to the nearby women: "See, there was a devil in that cat—and the Elder chased the devil out of it!" Hearing this, the Elder turned around and humbled the novice with a loving smile, as if to say, "Where did you get *that* idea from?" The simple folk there chuckled.

* * *

Once Elder Nektary, when giving a cell rule to Oleg, explained to him how to pray using the prayer rope. He told him about the "Optina Five-Hundred" prayer rule, consisting of three-hundred Jesus Prayers ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"), one hundred prayers to the Mother of God ("Most Holy Mother of God, save us"), fifty prayers to one's Guardian Angel ("Holy Angel of the Lord, my Guardian, pray to God for me"), and fifty prayers to All Saints ("All ye Saints, pray to God for us"). In order to make the last prayer more understandable to Oleg, the Elder told him, "Just think! What a great thing it is to pray to All Saints. When you only say, 'All ye Saints, pray to God for us,' then at this very moment in the Heavenly Kingdom, all, all, all the Saints standing before the Throne of God will simultaneously bow down low before the Lord and all together will say, 'Lord, have mercy.'"

* * *

A certain man, dressed in a long white shirt, used to come to Optina like a pilgrim and would stay for a while. He would

make predictions and would talk very loudly. He was known as Fool-for-Christ Gregory, and many people took him for a grace-filled, clairvoyant Elder. Some doubted, however, because he used foul language. Then people asked Elder Nektary what attitude they should have toward him, to which the Elder said, "Can the grace of God abide in a man who uses foul language?"

The Elder often mentioned grace, because he himself was in grace. He used to say that each bishop has grace, and that the Patriarch has twice as much.

* * *

The Elder also used to say that each day has its own special grace assigned to it. This grace is found in the assigned daily readings of the Gospels, the Epistles, the stichera and troparia. The thoughts contained therein are designated for that day, as also the daily commemoration of specific saints. This, he said, is connected with God's personal Providence assigned for the day.

* * *

Once during the rite of Confession, Elder Nektary called Oleg by the name of Leo when reading the prayer of absolution over him. When Oleg looked up in astonishment, thinking that the Elder had made a mistake, the Elder said, "You yourself are as strong as a lion. Remember how strong Samson was."

Oleg later took note of this, having come to realize that nothing that the Elder said was accidental.

Many years passed, and then the following incident occurred. It was summer. Oleg was staying somewhere in the country. He loved to roam in the woods. One evening he found himself in some deserted place. It began to rain hard, and it became apparent that the rain would last until morning and that he had gone too far to be able to return that night. Suddenly he noticed a little hut, wherein stayed a shepherd or a ranger of

that area. He knocked at the door, and an old man let him in, saying that he could stay there that night. There was really no room in which to sleep, so the man put Oleg on the floor, almost under the bed, beneath which slept a huge, angry dog. The rain beat on the hut and the three inhabitants slept soundly, when all of a sudden Oleg woke up in terrible pain. The calf of his leg was in the mouth of the big dog. Evidently he had moved in his sleep and had surprised the dog, which in self-defense had grabbed him by the leg. Realizing what was happening, Oleg grasped the jaws of the dog with both hands, and, being very strong, opened the dog's mouth. At this moment he remembered the words of Elder Nektary, and reflected that he had done to the dog what Samson had done to the lion.

However, the mysterious pronouncing of the name Leo during absolution became more associated in Oleg's mind with his being tonsured a monk and given the name Leo. Externally, Oleg did grow up to look like Elder Leonid (Leo in Schema), the first Elder of Optina. Even his personality had something in common with that Elder's: both he and Elder Leonid were of Ukrainian descent, had a good sense of humor, and, although they were both quite wise, were guileless like children.

When Oleg's tonsure took place in 1954, and he was not named Leonid, he was disappointed that the apparent prophecy of Elder Nektary had not come true. Archbishop Tikhon asked him after the tonsure whether he was happy with his new name Nektary, and hearing the above story about the name Leo, said, "Well, there's still the schema"—meaning that Fr. Nektary could be named Leo when receiving the great monastic schema.

But the prophetic eye of the holy Elder Nektary was not mistaken. As Oleg realized later to his great surprise, he was tonsured precisely on the repose date of the great Elder Leonid of Optina. Elder Nektary had foreseen, over thirty

years in advance, that the tonsure of his spiritual son would take place on that very day.

* * *

Once at the end of hearing Oleg's confession, Elder Nektary lovingly asked, as usual, "Have you said everything?" to which Oleg replied that he had.

Everyone knew that the Elder was clairvoyant, and no one dared to hide anything from him; usually they would all sincerely confess everything. But now, with an almost singsong tone, the Elder asked again, "Have you said everything?" and repeated this question several times. Oleg could not remember anything more for the life of him.

Then, in a very soft voice, with indescribable love and gentleness, he pronounced just one phrase, "What about the egg?"

Suddenly something horrible occurred: something that had long been forgotten came to Oleg's mind. O God, of course!

This was already some years after the Russian revolution, and times were hard. Famine was raging all over, and many children were running away from home in order to provide food for themselves. Many people were dying, but God preserved the Kontzevitches and they had food. One day not long after the revolution, Oleg had been sitting on a fence, and, as was his custom, he had pierced a hole in an egg and sucked out the contents. At that time an egg was of great worth, having great nutritional value. As he sat there with a hollow egg in his hands, Oleg saw a boy of about his age walking with an extremely pitiful expression. It was apparent that he had not eaten for a long time. And here the evil tempter hastened to install a thought in Oleg: to mock the famished boy.

"Do you want an egg?" Oleg asked, showing the boy the empty egg. The boy reached out his hand, and Oleg gave him the shell, laughing with glee that he had fooled someone. The boy, seeing that it was an evil joke, silently lowered his sorrowful

gaze to the earth and, almost crying, continued on his way. The conscience of the joker was pricked.

And here, in a moment, upon hearing just one word, "egg," from Elder Nektary, the whole horrible picture appeared before Oleg's mental gaze. How could the Elder know such details? Having evoked in the penitent a feeling of repentance, the Elder forgave and absolved the sin.

"Here is an example," Bishop Nektary would say in later years, "of the extent of Elder Nektary's clairvoyance."

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Bishop Nektary's sister Vera remembers how once, during summertime, when they were in the Elder's reception room, the Elder pointed to a painting of the Holy Family: the Mother of God with Joseph working as a carpenter and the Savior as a boy, also doing carpentry work. The Elder told her to read aloud the caption underneath the picture, which said something to the effect of "Labor is a holy thing." With this the Elder had indicated to Vera her life's path: that for the rest of her life, although she was the daughter of educated, well-to-do parents, she would have to earn her living through hard labor. Later she had to be a carpenter, building with her own hands a small house wherein her sick mother Alexandra was taken care of and finally died. In this cabin, Alexandra was tonsured with the blessing of Elder Nektary.

* * *

People would also send questions and requests for prayer to the Elders by way of Alexandra Kontzevitch. There was a particular young lady, a student, who wanted very much to get married. She met a nice fellow student, but she had seen him only a few times and he had said only a few words to her. When Oleg's mother was preparing to make her usual pilgrimage to Optina and the Elder, this girl came to her and said, "Please ask

the Elder to pray for me." She said nothing else, not indicating what the Elder was to pray for. In such cases, many people who sent requests would send little gifts to the Elder, either food or clothing; but the humble girl was too poor to send anything, and only asked for a little prayer.

When Alexandra returned from the pilgrimage, the girl asked if the Elder had promised to pray for her. Alexandra said that the Elder had told her, the girl, to read forty Akathists to the Mother of God: one Akathist a day without fail, for forty days. The girl was surprised, but undertook to fulfill the Elder's obedience and began to read an Akathist every day. On the fortieth day, she accidentally met the young student, who, out of the blue, proposed to her. Soon there was a wedding, and a happy marriage followed.

* * *

"When I was completing my engineering education at the Institute of Transportation, I was miraculously exempted from the Red army. I will tell you how the Lord, in His mercy, through the help of Batiushka Elder Nektary, freed me from being drafted into the Red Army.

"From my youth I already knew that I would be a monk someday, because when I was nine years old Elder Nektary foretold this to me. By the time I was sixteen or seventeen years old or even older, I had, just like many other young fellows, a great enthusiasm for sports. But this was very much disliked by my mother, because she also knew that I would have to be a monk; and of course exercise and sports do not bring spiritual benefit. I enjoyed swimming, fishing, mountain climbing, light athletics, gymnastics: all this was of great interest to me. And Mother was grieving. And so she was constantly talking me out of sports, saying, 'All these sports do not bring you any spiritual benefit.' As a result, we had these grievous conversations. Finally Mother said, 'Well, soon we will go on our next trip to see the

Elder (he was then already in exile in Kholmishche), and we'll ask him whether he will bless you to waste time on sports. See if he will bless your athletics and swimming or not!' I had nothing to do but to agree. And so we decided this question, although I was convinced that the Elder would of course not allow me my sports. While going there I was sorrowing all the time, because I would have to put an end to my enjoyments.

"So we arrived. Mother posed various questions concerning her spiritual life, concerning daily needs; and the Elder gently took it all in and answered. I was hoping that Mother would, after all, not ask the question about me. But at the end of the conversation, Mother suddenly said, 'Batiushka, dear Elder, here is my dear son—passionately involved in sports—swimming, fishing—occupying himself with athletics. Tell us, can he do it nor not?' I was very tense, and suddenly, to my great amazement, I heard the Elder say the following, 'God bless him! God bless him to do all that.' And then he added, 'He can fish, which is an apostolic occupation; and it is good to occupy oneself with athletics. God bless him.'

"My mother was amazed, and I was overjoyed; and of course I continued to be involved in sports. Moreover, having received such a blessing, I completed a course as a teacher of athletics and began [to teach] a series of courses for high school sports groups, and made money on it. My sisters continued studying, and I was able to offer financial help towards the upkeep of the family. During the day I attended the Institute, and in the evenings I taught athletics in the schools. As time went by, I received a temporary exemption from being drafted into the Red army, thanks to the fact that I had not completed my diploma project, which I had to prepare in two years.

"And so it happened that, just before I took the subject for my diploma project, we made our customary pilgrimage to see Elder Nektary in Kholmishche. My mother was grieving very

much because of the forthcoming draft; and seeing the Elder, she said, 'Batiushka dear, just think—my dear son will be drafted into the army. He's of drafting age.'

"The Elder, gently looking at her, said, 'But your son will not be taken as a soldier! Well, Matushka, are you glad about that?!'

"Mother fell on the ground before the Elder and began to kiss his hands, while I looked at all this rather skeptically, because I knew that I had no reason to be exempt from the army, so much the more because physically, thanks to my exercises, I was strong and healthy. And so we left.

"The day of my draft arrived. My mother was absolutely calm, and I, in great turmoil, went to the draft headquarters. Mother remained on her knees, reading the Akathist. One had to take along all documents relating to one's completion of educational institutions—everything that one had. These documents were to be submitted before the medical examination, and then we had to come up to each table to be examined: first the heart, then the lungs and other organs. At each place, everywhere, they would find me to be absolutely healthy and would write, as I saw with my own eyes, 'absolutely fit'—unquestionably fit to be drafted. In such a way I passed through all the areas as one perfectly fit for the Red Army. And when they would ask me if there was anything to complain about, then I would joke, saying that not enough bread was rationed—since bread was then issued according to cards. In actuality, I had nothing to complain about. And so, having passed this whole commission, we were informed that in two hours we must report to receive military certificates.

"I came home and said, trying to console Mother, 'Dear Mother, in spite of everything they acknowledged me as eligible. There is no way out—they will draft me into the army!' But to this Mother said, 'Ah! What a man of little faith you are!

How can you doubt the words of the Elder? Our Elder is clairvoyant! He doesn't say a single word in vain! They surely will not take you into the army.'

"'Mother dear,' I said, 'Look for yourself at the reality of things....' I felt very sorry for Mother. But in two hours I went to the draft headquarters, and they called out all the names and gave certificates to all—except me. I went to the window and asked why they weren't calling my name. 'Come back in two hours,' they answered. I of course began to be upset, because I perceived hints concerning my father, who had been killed by bolsheviks. If they were to know this, it would hurt me at my school and at work. I was afraid that this would become known. I came home and said to Mother that they still had not given me [the certificate], but that I was afraid and worried because everyone had received the certificate, but not me. And my mother, with assured satisfaction, said, 'See for yourself, they didn't give you the certificate, which means that they will not give you the certificate, because the Elder said so. That's how it should be! And do not doubt this!'

"Then I, together with Mother, on my knees read the Akathist. In two hours I again went to the military commission. I watched how a second line received the certificates, but no one called me. Again I went to the window, and again they told me, 'Come back at the end of the day.' I became very nervous. Again I returned home, this time almost a wreck, while Mother was joyous that everything would be all right. Finally, already for the third time, at the end of the day, I went there. They called me, and I received a military certificate, but it was some different color, not like the ones the others received. I asked which kind of military firearm division I was being drafted into—perhaps into aviation, infantry, artillery, or navy. Then I opened the certificate, which was in an envelope. It turned out that I was freed from military service because precisely that year

only, due to the fact that there was a need of sports teachers, I was freed in order to work for the further development of 'physi-culture'!!!

"In conclusion, I would like to say that Elder Nektary had foreseen several years in advance that if I would take up sports, I would complete the course of sports instructors, and that thanks to this I would be exempt from the Red Army. That is why the Elder blessed me to continue with my enthusiasm for sports, saying to Mother five years previously, 'God bless him to take up athletics.'"

* * *

"In completing the engineering institute, I had to prepare and submit a diploma project on the construction of a locomotive or a related topic. We all had to choose a subject for the project, for example, freight locomotives, passenger locomotives, and so on. We also could do projects on train plants, factories, and everything dealing with trains. Of course, all of us students wanted to concentrate on the locomotive itself, since this would involve the limitless riding and operating of locomotives. I had already had the experience of operating a locomotive and had received a permit to do so. It also involved other activity. I chose to work on the locomotive. Nevertheless, in order to finally accept the project, Mother and I, after all, decided to go to Kholmishche to see the Elder. We arrived safely and saw the Elder, and I asked him, 'What would you bless, dear Batiushka, for a diploma project: locomotive construction or something else?!' He looked at me and said, 'Take as a project the construction of a train-building plant; and if you will ride on a train, then you'll become a cripple. And who needs you as a cripple?'

"I returned home and never ventured to sit in a locomotive. With great joy one of the students switched with me because he had been assigned to the subject of designing a locomotive

plant, and I had already chosen the locomotive itself. And so, because of Elder Nektary, I had to change my plan.

"And what do you think occurred? The defense of the diploma project was conducted in the presence of a large commission: sixteen important men as I recall, and maybe even more. They all sat with binoculars. Huge blueprints were hanging all over the walls, and these men, through the binoculars, would carefully investigate these plans. But most of the students had only locomotives as projects, and were defending their plans for either freight locomotives, passenger locomotives, or locomotives for other special purposes. The process was tedious, and all the professors were bored due to the repetition of the subject. But when I stepped forward and hung my blueprints all over, then something new happened. They had all been bored with the locomotives, and my defense turned out brilliantly—because of the blessing of the Elder and not my achievements. And when they read aloud the title of my thesis, 'A Plant for Building Locomotive Engines and Cars,' they all jumped up and shook my hand. At once I received many job offers to be an engineer at such-and-such a plant, since the representatives of various plants were present, as well as technical directors and other important individuals. This sensational success I attribute only to the blessing of the Elder."

Belev Convent.

6

Belev Convent

NATALIA B.*

The Belev city region, being geographically close to Optina, contained several convents whose spiritual life was for decades guided by the Optina Elders, starting with Elder Leonid. The area was also known as the residence of the philosopher Ivan Kireyevsky, who was instrumental in beginning the publishing, under the guidance of Elder Macarius, of the manuscript translations of St. Paisius Velichkovsky, which had been providentially gathered by Paisian disciples. Abbot Moses, who was associated with the Belev convents, made it a rule that each of the Patristic editions published by Optina be sent gratis to each coenobitic monastery in the Russian Empire.

Below is an account of how Elder Nektary not only rendered spiritual guidance, but also inspired others with monastic ideals.

In the winter of 1916 Elder Anatole arrived in Petrograd for the laying of the foundation of the Shamordino Metochion. We went to him for confession and received the Elder at our home. We had received the book *Calm Havens* from acquaintances and from it had learned of the Elders of Optina and about Fr. Gerasim. From the description I was especially drawn to

* Taken from *Little Flowers of Optina Monastery*, pp. 115-27.

Elder Nektary, and I wrote his name down in my commemoration book.

In the summer of that same year my wish was finally fulfilled, and I went to Optina with my mother and my sister. Fr. Anatole called for us, but I wanted instead to see Fr. Nektary and wanted him to indicate for me which monastery I should enter. I already had the desire to abandon the world but my sister, on the contrary, was afraid of this and kept putting off our trip. I remember that the "huts" were full and they didn't receive us for a few days, and directed us to speak to the cell-attendant. At the very first meeting Elder Nektary thanked me for my prayers.

We were with Mother and he received all three of us right away and, taking us by the hand, myself and my sister, he led us up to an icon of the Holy Trinity (this icon was high up in the corner in his cell) and said, "I receive you like Abraham received the Holy Trinity," calling us angels.

His voice, his affectionate form of address and these words so embarrassed me that I don't even remember the rest of his words due to my disconcerted state. I poured out streams of tears of compunction, repentance and joy that I was seeing a holy Elder—that I was seeing an angel on earth.

Later, after talking for a while, the Elder gave my sister something to read and gave me a leaflet on Sts. Joachim and Anna; after I finished reading it he blessed me to take it as a keepsake. Since I knew that he never did anything without a reason, I pondered—why a leaflet about them? The history of the birth of the Mother of God is well known to all. Then, two years later, when I was again at the Elder's in the autumn, he sent me with a nun from Belev to spend some time in the Belev Convent, saying, "I bless you—not once, but thrice," and he kept blessing me. He didn't even ask if my mother consented to it, and he himself appointed the day of our departure, September 9th. We

received Holy Communion on the 8th, the Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos, and in the evening, when I heard the canon to the holy Ancestors of God, I remembered about the leaflet and understood that they were my protectors, as if they had led me to the Belev Convent.

At this point I'll tell you about Fr. Nektary's repose. I really wanted to be at his funeral, and I was always afraid that I might not find out and would be too late, and I begged him to summon me in spirit. And in a way he really did foretell it to me, six or seven years beforehand. I'd already been living in Moscow for five years. On my way from Belev, I would always spend a few days in Optina, and sometimes even a few weeks. Once the Elder gave me some writing to do—to copy something out of a book by St. John Chrysostom, from his commentary on the Gospel according to St. John, from the conversation of Jesus Christ with the Samaritan woman. He marked where it began and ended with little crosses. These were the words: *The hour cometh, when the true worshippers shall worship ... neither in this mountain ... but in spirit and in truth* (cf. John 4:21, 23). So many years went by and I would sometimes recall it.... That winter I tried constantly to see Fr. Nektary, but they warned me that he was weak, and that they would not let me in. I heard that he was getting weaker and weaker and I was very worried. One Sunday I decided to go to the village of Kolomenskoye, and in the church, by the icon of the Mother of God,* I unexpectedly met a nun that I knew, who informed me that the Elder had grown extremely weak, and no longer received or answered anyone.

Becoming alarmed, I began to find out about his health from his spiritual children and travelled to Maroseiko daily. On

* The wonderworking "Reigning" Icon of the Mother of God, which had appeared on March 2, 1917, the day of the forced abdication of Tsar-martyr Nicholas II.—Ed.

the Sunday of the Samaritan Woman, when I heard the reading of the Gospel, I suddenly remembered that the Elder had given that to me to copy.... A pain pierced my heart—was he alive today? And, sure enough—on that very day, when departing to see him, I learned at the station that he had reposed.

To enumerate all the instances of his clairvoyance would take quite a bit of time. One sensed that he knew everything beforehand and heard one's thoughts and replied to them.

The first time I talked with him, when he received both me and my sister, the Elder tried to persuade my sister to enter a monastery (I had wanted this, but she was afraid), but it was as if he paid little attention to me.

"Xenichka," he said, "I beg you, I implore you—go to a monastery. Do you agree? Do you promise? You can choose either Shamordino or Belev." He intended to have a talk with Mother, but she did not consent to let us go. He held my sister's hands crosswise in his own—her right in his right, and her left in his left. But while he was persuading my sister, he paid no attention to me. Since I had come for a blessing and for direction, and, loving my sister, did not wish to be separated from her, when the Elder walked out I asked her to ask a blessing from him that we not be separated. And he, bringing caramels (very tasty, gooey candies) out to us, said to me, "We'll manage...." And that's how it turned out. I didn't leave him and he hastened to arrange things for my sister, foreseeing her repose, as he later told me.

Mother did not give her consent, burst into tears and was offended at us. Even Elder Nektary could not convince her to let us go then, though he spoke much with her. Eight or nine months later my sister took sick, suffered much and reposed half a year later. The last two months she daily received Communion and Unction, and the Elder consoled her with letters. He said much more about her to us afterwards, and about how

parents sin when they don't permit their children to become monastics. "They feel sorry for them, they don't give them to God, and the Lord takes them Himself," he said. He later consoled me, saying that my sister was in blessedness with the Elders. He saw her in a dream in a white mantia and white kamilavka.

I remember how once my whole family came to see Fr. Nektary, and we all went in at once: my parents, my older brother, my nephew and me. My father began to complain about me; it was quite annoying, but it was impossible to object or justify myself. My father was dissatisfied with the fact that I was giving away money.

I recall that the Elder said to me strictly that I ought not to be an "upstart," but should be satisfied with how much and to whom my father was donating; furthermore, he said that at times giving money might not be beneficial, but harmful, and that one must have discretion in everything.

Mother sometimes murmured at my father because of his thrift; she loved to help people and she had to do it secretly. She was counting on help from the Elder in this regard, and later asked him to defend her before Father, telling him that she had only made a mistake. But here Fr. Nektary said that "stinginess is not silliness" and gave examples. (I don't remember them.) We were bewildered at this unexpected development and were puzzled by the Elder, and later expressed this to him. But he, as if he didn't know what we were talking about, said laughing—"But I didn't know, I didn't understand." But it was not that simple; it was sometimes quite difficult to understand him. Often he even totally contradicted his own words, instructing me at the same time to act as he wanted me to. Thus, continually sending me to Belev, he instructed the Abbess to give me a cell and an obedience. After this the Abbess came to see him to speak about me, wishing to turn me down, since the dissolution

of the Belev Convent was already planned; and despite the blessing and request of the Elder, she did not want to accept me (inasmuch as I was from a bourgeois family). Then the Elder denied his words, saying that he did not know why I did not go to Petrograd, and that to remain in Belev was *my* wish (but I had only remained there in obedience to him). But when the Abbess left, he again sent me there, saying, "Live there, Matushka won't drive you out." At that very time my relatives summoned me to Petrograd, but the Elder did not let me go.

Fr. Nektary frequently touched people by his somewhat maternal thoughtfulness. Thus, I came with my other sister during the winter, when it was already very bad in the guesthouse. We stayed there from Cheese-fare Week until the sixth week of the Fast, and the Elder himself took care of us. He gave us his own blanket, a pillow, a basin to wash our faces—he anticipated everything. Few people came in wintertime, and he received us often and fed us sweets. He would whisper to us to wait a bit after the general blessing and would give us each either dates, or cakes, or rolls.... But we sure got "cakes" at home, when we returned to Petrograd! The Elders called sorrows "gifts."

In the year of my sister's illness and death Fr. Nektary unexpectedly gave my older sister a little chest, a carved box (a coffin), a packet of tea, a handkerchief (tears), and cakes to give out to everyone.

A year before the famine he gave out five mint cakes to everyone in memory of the satisfying of the five thousand with five loaves of bread.

When I was getting ready to enter the monastery for good, the Elder began to toughen me for it. He left me to enjoy myself for a while. Autumn came, and I was in a summer outfit and slippers. My relatives promised to send me an overcoat and money, but I received neither the one nor the other. The rains began and I was freezing; in my room in the guesthouse there

was no stove. They offered to switch me to another room, but Fr. Nektary did not bless it. He pointed with his hand to the thermometer: "Look—it's not freezing yet, is it? Remember how they lived here when it was 70 degrees? They huddled together like little birds. Endure—the grace of God will warm you." But strangers pitied me and were amazed that I didn't change my room. The monks offered me things—one a padded jacket, another raspberry jam. I was coughing. They gave me gloves. The Elder's cell-attendant gave me his high boots, and I walked in them to the Skete and to church, like "puss-in-boots." Everyone looked with amazement; the Elder alone seemed not to notice anything.

Thus he got me accustomed to a rigorous way of life as a preparation for the monastery. The monastery I had entered required us to pay our own expenses. Each sister had her own things. I remember, it was hard for me to bake bread, to knead dough. It took more firewood, and it seemed to me that it would have been simpler to make pancakes, but the Elder wouldn't let me.

Once I asked about vegetable oil, and though I later considered even this as a luxury for myself, I had wanted to fortify myself against starvation. But Fr. Nektary, stretching the point, said, "It's good for the health.... Well, go ahead."

I once had a thought: is it possible that the Elder has no sympathy for me, doesn't know how hard the conditions of life are for me in Belev after Petrograd? But then he himself suddenly began to ask in detail how I was doing, how I was eating. He taught me to give potatoes to peasants for sowing so as to receive half the yield from them. He taught me how to exchange vegetable oil for salt. He asked me if it was hard for me to carry water from a nearby steep hill in autumn and spring. He taught me to use rain water and snow-melt so that I would not have to go down to the river.

He asked me how much a bucket weighed—were there twenty pounds in it? I would carry one bucket with difficulty, but later I strengthened my muscles and got used to it. "Endure all this for God's sake." And he consoled me, saying that it was good enough that I was living in Belev. He later said, "You see, not once did you ask me to let you go to Petrograd."

I loved to listen to the Elder when he would recount something, sometimes in parables, from his teachings or from the lives of the holy nun-saints, indicating certain of them and saying, "Read it and do likewise." About prayer he said, "Pray, and the prayer itself will teach you everything." He was a doer of the Jesus Prayer, loved to speak about it, and repeated, "This is my commandment to you—always, everywhere, and during any activity, to say, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"

When I said to him that I hoped to be saved by his prayers alone, he instantly became very serious and, with emphasis (for humility), said, "Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

I very much wanted to have a prayer rope from the Elder and asked about it, but he kept putting it off. Later, when the Bishop blessed me with his prayer rope, Fr. Nektary said to me, "You've got one from a bishop—what are you asking me for?" But I wanted to have one from him, for feast days and for when I would receive Holy Communion. "I promise, but for the time being I don't have one." But he had a whole drawer full of prayer ropes.

Once at a later time he told me to bring him one and promised to trade, but I brought two. He was quite pleased and promised to give one to me, but at my departure said again, "Pray a little longer; then I'll give it to you." In this way, I think, he wanted to break me of my passionate attachment.

When I arrived from Moscow I asked again, and the Elder again promised very firmly to give it to me at my tonsure, but I didn't remind him and I didn't get it.

He received few people at the Skete—two or three people per day—and very rarely performed the service of Holy Unction for anyone. People were jealous of me and my sister, that the Elder performed the Unction service for us himself and didn't receive anyone else that day. He was like an angel, in white vestments with pink trim, and reminded me very much of Elder Ambrose.

He was weak and sometimes even sat down to rest. At my departure he prepared a gift for me—his white priest's sticharion, which was just what I wanted. He said, "Here—take care of this; I've prepared a gift for you that I know you'll like." I thought that it was a preparation for my death, and so I did not receive the intended blessing from it.

He asked me later if I was taking care of the sticharion. Before my tonsure I asked his blessing to be tonsured in it instead of in a hair shirt, and he blessed me but told me not to alter it. He also blessed me to take the name of my reposed mother.

The Elder greatly loved obedience and humility. Regarding this, that we might teach others when visiting family members, he advised, "Always speak only meekly and calmly, even in the event that those with whom you are speaking are much younger."

When I complained to him about my incorrigibility and was grieved over it, he said, "Let weakness and repentance take turns until you die. In the *Prologue* is the following: 'If one who has sinned says, "Lord, I have sinned, forgive me," it will be for him better than a king's crown.'"

Once I asked him to give me a penance as a punishment and for correction, but he said, *By the Lord are the steps of a man rightly directed* (Ps. 36:23).

When I once expressed my regret over my sinfully spent life (like that of a pagan—balls, the theater, flirting), Fr. Nektary said, "No man living is justified before God (cf. Ps. 142:2). The Lord forgives you and I forgive you."

When confessing he was very serious and concentrated, and at times it was quite difficult, even terrifying to speak to him about my sins; terrifying precisely because of his sanctity, though he was always gracious and never bawled me out or punished me, even when I might have expected it. Thus, when I failed to attend Matins (it was at four in the morning with us, and it was hard in the winter) the Elder said, "Your Guardian Angel is praying for you." In regards to confession the Elder said that the point was not in mere words, but in contrition; and that the Lord sees the heart. But he later approved writing down my sins, as my confessor in Moscow had trained me to do.

Once he said, "Our sins are as the sands of the sea, and is it possible to recount them all?... And what kind of sins have you got?—only weaknesses. With you everything's fine." I didn't like that phrase at all.

Knowing that Fr. Nektary kissed certain sisters, I once had the thought: "That means I'm so impure, so filthy, that Batiushka kisses others, but has never kissed me." And suddenly the Elder, as if hearing my thought, said in reply, "Child Elenochka...." And with such tenderness he kissed my eyes and face. I was stunned, astonished. Once on another occasion he kissed my braid. I had very long hair, down to my knees, and he took my braid and shifted it to my shoulder from my back (I was reading to him at the time); and when I saw that he was kissing my dusty hair, I was very embarrassed. He was killing me with his humility.

He collected photographs of all his spiritual children and told me to bring mine. His form of address was always affectionate; he called me "bright girl" and "little friend." He liked

to give an example of love of labor, and he was always occupied with something. He would copy, write or cut up letters, cutting off clean bits of paper and writing down names on them. He made an effort not to waste one little piece of paper. When his cell-attendants were storing up firewood, the Elder went out to his little courtyard garden and carried wood chips and twigs in his riassa, laboring as well. (They were just right for kindling for the hearth.)

He likewise often prepared his own food and cooked it. He frequently gave me the obedience to set the samovar to boil for him, and once he said with reproach, "If only you would make soup for me even once." But I was happy to labor for him, inasmuch as he would come to the kitchen to watch. During the famine he sometimes fed me in his cell, saying jokingly, "Eat, or you won't make it to Belev." Once he prepared supper for me and mixed everything himself in the pot: there were potatoes, kasha, and cabbage, probably from cabbage soup, and pieces of fish. I was full and refused, but he told me to eat as an obedience; and when I had eaten it all, he praised me: "There's a good girl."

My sister loved to dress well and later, considering it a sin to waste money on expensive material, still liked to be elegantly dressed, even with plain material. She wrote to the Elder about this, asking if there were a sin in this. And he replied, "*Follow peace with all men, and holiness* (simplicity), as the Apostle says, *without which no man shall see the Lord* (Heb. 12:14). One can be prideful in rags, and humble in finery."

I also recall how Fr. Nektary went for confession to the monastery infirmary, to Archimandrite Agapit, and we sometimes accompanied him. He was weak and would become tired. I remember that we once said to him, "Batiushka, if only you would take a cane; it would be easier for you to walk with a cane." He replied, "I don't have a blessing for that yet." By this

he showed that even in such small matters he asked a blessing of his spiritual father or his abba—the Archimandrite.

They say that in his youth Fr. Nektary was handsome. He had large blue eyes and very long curly blond hair; he was gentle, and not thin.

One Shamordino nun told me that she had liked Fr. Nektary very much back when he was still a hierodeacon or hieromonk. She also liked the way he served and, learning when it would be his turn to serve in the Monastery, she would try to come expressly at that time. Their common confessor was Fr. Anatole (Zertsalov). He teased her and made fun of her: "What do you like about such a Lipsmacker?"

Elder Anatole himself greatly loved Elder Nektary, and the latter loved him as well. Elder Nektary at times sought to see through the crack in the door what the Elder was doing. He even wanted to eat what was left on his plate. When I asked him about this, wanting to verify it, the Elder laughed a great deal.

Elder Anatole (Potapov) also told me how he (Fr. Nektary) was once guilty of something before Elder Ambrose, and Fr. Ambrose wanted to hit him in the back with his cane, but he successfully ducked and escaped the blow and ran away. For a whole week afterwards he hid from the Elder and tried not to catch his eye, even though he had the habit of coming to the Elder daily for a blessing.

He told me about this so entertainingly, as only he knew how, and he laughed to the point of tears.... But he told me this because of an incident: I had also fallen afoul of my Abbess, and he advised me to avoid her until she forgot about it. But normally he instructed me to beg forgiveness in all cases, whether I was guilty or not.

Everyone loved the Elder and forgave and permitted him everything. Thus he acted openly as a fool-for-Christ's-sake. Fr. Nikon told me that he remembered how Fr. Nektary went

around with a tall white pointed cap on his head and a yellow cape over a red lining. He appeared in the trapeza looking like that, with a felt boot on one foot, and a light blue slipper on the other.

Sometimes, when he served in the skete church, his long-johns were visible during the censing. "It was a good thing that women weren't allowed in our church," said Fr. Nikon. But the Abbot, seeing him, would smile.

My sister and I came from Petrograd annually. I often came from Belev on foot, since there was no way to get there by rail. I walked when it was raining and when blizzards would block the road. Once I reached him only after three days. (It was twenty-two miles.)

The Elder sometimes met me sternly, saying that it was futile for me to undertake such a trip on foot, that he himself was sad and despondent....

But for the most part, as soon as you'd see him, you'd forget all your sorrows and troubles. And you would return home with such relief and renewal of soul.... He would joke, comfort and pray. Sometimes he would tell you specifically to come on foot: "You're still young, you've got to labor a little."

Later, when I was insistently summoned to come home to Petrograd, the Elder did not bless me to go: "The grace of God didn't lead you out of there for you to go back. If your mother wants to see you, let her come to Belev herself." However, at that time it was impossible to travel without a permit, even by freight train; but to this, Fr. Nektary said, "Let her come to Belev on foot, like they used to walk to Kiev on pilgrimage."

Occasionally he would keep me with him for a long time. I'd live there for a month or sometimes for two weeks. It happened that way on Pascha.

I'll never forget those services of Passion Week and Bright Week ... and what I received there.... I remember that we were

confessing in the evening on Great Saturday. Right there in the "hut" they were reading the Rule [for Holy Communion], and we went straight from there to the Paschal Matins service. That was the last year of the life of Elder Anatole (Potapov), and he served together with Bishop Micah, who was living at Optina, and with the Archimandrite.

During the procession it felt as though all the reposed Elders were right with us ... and how joyful and radiant our souls felt.

Everyone greeted Fr. Anatole with Pascha right away; they went from Liturgy to his cell, and he presented everyone with an egg, and afterwards everyone rested. But we didn't feel like sleeping. We went to the Skete and sat on the steps near Fr. Nektary's "hut" and sang Paschal hymns, in expectation of when they would open the cherished door to his "hut" for us.

At two in the afternoon all the bells of the Monastery and the Skete began to ring. The rest period was over, and rows of well-wishers streamed to Fr. Nektary—brothers, sisters and pilgrims. The brothers' choir sang through the Paschal songs for him. The sisters did likewise. He was triumphant for the Feast. He wore a festal riassa, a klobuk and a gold cross. It was very becoming to him. He had a garnet prayer rope. He gave the brothers each a red egg.

All week he received those who came and gave them consolations, but I got nothing, not even an egg. When the week was over and the guests had dispersed I asked to see him. He said, "Well, look at that—I've given out all the consolations and there's nothing left for you...." He was trying me that way on purpose....

But he consoled me with many words, and sometimes without words, simply comforting me in spirit. Such joy and peace was granted me, such detachment from everything, and prayer.... I wanted to die there....

Elder Anatole II (Potapov) of Optina.

But sometimes the Elder liked to torment me a little, saying afterwards, "You have to get used to waiting patiently."

That year, when everyone expected the dissolution of our monastery, many Shamordino sisters lived at Optina. The Elder said that twelve virgins were living with them, and that there would always be a place for me in Optina.

Once the Elder told me that he was miserable; that he was despondent, afflicted, and had lost the ability to pray. He asked me to pray for him and to convey this to my Abbess. I thought he was talking about me. "Is it possible, Batiushka, for you to have a burden on your soul? I thought you were always in a state of prayer and joy of spirit." He replied to this that mistakes happen: "Sometimes you say something from yourself or resolve a question in someone else's life incorrectly. At other times I would call someone to strict account at confession or, on the contrary, would not give a penance when it ought to have been given. There are punishments for all this—the grace of God punishes us; it steps away for a time and we suffer."

Fr. Nektary always told me to pray for him—he was teaching me humility. And I always felt awkward and strange when he begged me like that.

The Elder was unusually gracious—he never exposed my misdeeds, never reproached me, and never punished me. He would expose me by the use of praise, letting me feel my sinfulness, my filth. He would say, "Elenochka (with affection), you're such a beautiful angel." Or he would say it in French....

"Batiushka, I'm a horned beast," and it would be settled. And he would kiss me on the head.

"You've consoled me by your arrival. I'm happy for you; everything's fine with you ... and I'm sad for myself.... You're growing and blossoming; when a half year goes by you will have grown by another quarter. You have a golden foundation for monasticism." But it was nothing of the sort. He wanted only

to console, to soothe me in sorrows, to scatter despondency. When he wanted to delight someone with his conversation for a long time, as is said about St. Seraphim of Sarov, he would lock the door with the latch, so no one would come in and bother him.

And how good, how blessed it was during those hours. It seemed as if Paradise were not needed, if only I could be with the Elder by the light of one lampada and listen to him endlessly, and kiss his hands ... which he let me do. I would kiss them to my heart's content.... How many tears were poured out on his riassa! He would cover my head with his wide sleeve, say something comforting, and I would cry there under his sleeve; but he would burst out laughing, and then laughter would come through my tears and joy after sorrow.

Elder Gerasim II of Kaluga, who kept close contact with Optina.

7

The Heavenly Chancery

IRINA IVANOVNA*

*There was always an unbroken spiritual bond between the Elders, even between those living far from one another. One of the spiritual centers closest to Optina, was the St. Sergius Skete, founded relatively recently by Elder Gerasim II, the spiritual offspring of Elder Gerasim I, who was tonsured in Optina. The latter, who was under the guidance of Optina Elders starting with Elder Leonid, was responsible for the flowering of the St. Tikhon of Kaluga Hermitage as well as several convents. Elder Gerasim II operated his Skete as a spiritual hospital, a place of healing for emotionally, spiritually, and physically sick people. He was of the same spirit as Optina, whose Elders would at times send needy people to him. The account below comes from recently gathered material.***

I WAS STILL LIVING IN SHAMORDINO when they chose Fr. Nektary as Elder. Up to that point I had seen him only once, when he came to serve with us for a week, and I remember very well how he served a Moleben to the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God. I kept trying to take his blessing then. And then I heard

* Later nun Lyubov of Shamordino. She had the obedience of working in the pharmacy of the Optina infirmary. She related this when she was about eighty years old.—ED.

** Taken from *Little Flowers of Optina Monastery*, pp. 94-99.

that he had become an Elder. I asked a lot of questions in Optina and flew straight to the "hut." There were still only a few people there then. He received me right away. I begged him for counsel, but he said to me, "No, no; you turn to Fr. Anatole."

I said to him, "Batiushka, after all, this is the 'hut' and you're the Elder in it—how can you refuse?"

But he replied, "This is only a misunderstanding. I was only put here as a watchman." I finally begged him to tell me something. Then he said, "Well, all right—when you're thirty years old they'll write about you in a book." I was surprised and started laughing, but he said, "I'm speaking to you seriously; they'll write about you and me in a book." Then he treated me with candies and cakes: "See how I'm comforting you? And you know, I don't do this for everyone. Now when I can't receive you or when you'll have sorrows, remember this day and be consoled by the memory."

Then I begged him, "Batiushka, tell me something else; you're an Elder."

And he said, "What kind of elder am I? I'm destitute. You'd better take a closer look at me. You're the ones that are earthly angels and heavenly men, but I'm earthborn." And saying goodbye he said, "I'm grateful to you for the visit. I was sorrowful and despondent, and you came and consoled me."

Another time it was like this: My teeth really hurt and my gums were swollen. Then I again had occasion to go to Optina, and I was happy. I went to see Fr. Nektary. He anointed my cheek with oil (from the ever-burning lampada in his cell before the miracle-working icon of the Mother of God "It is Truly Meet"). He didn't bless me to pull the tooth and said, "Live here for a week and come to me every day for a treatment." I began to come to him every day. Once he brought out a cut-glass goblet with church wine and told me to drink it up. I drank it all without question, and he laughed: "See, the wine was dark

like a cloud, and now there are only stars left in the glass. And no cloud." How consoling this was for me! Then I begged him again to tell me something profitable. He pressed my head to his heart and said, "Little friend, listen to my heart." I listened, and his heart was beating in a marvelous way. He asked, "Do you hear anything?" I answered him, "Batiushka, your heart is doing the Jesus Prayer." He said, "Well, keep being obedient. And when you're ninety years old your heart will beat like that too." I objected, "Batiushka, I won't live to be ninety; that means this will never happen." "No, no; God will help you," he said, calming me.

I worked in the infirmary. Fr. Nektary used to come to the infirmary to see someone, and would come straight to see me, without knocking.

Agapit (he was an archimandrite) lived in our infirmary in retirement. Fr. Nektary confessed to him. And so one time he came and said, "I've come to Batiushka to confess." I said, "He's having dinner—wait a bit." I went in to tell Fr. Agapit, and he came in right behind me. Fr. Agapit was sitting at the table. There was some kind of food, and he had just picked up the spoon. Fr. Nektary took the food away from him and wouldn't give it back. They argued and argued, and then Fr. Nektary gave it to him.

One time Fr. Nektary was lying in the infirmary. Fr. Dositheus was bringing lunch to everyone. He brought the Elder everything, but forgot the spoon. I came, and the Elder told me about it. "Batiushka, that means he forgot," I said. But seeing that everything was there except the spoon, Fr. Nektary ate everything from the edge of the plate. Fr. Dositheus realized his mistake and brought the Elder a spoon, holding it with both hands. "Batiushka, here's a spoon for you." He looked, and he'd already eaten everything. "Batiushka, why did you eat without a spoon?" "But I thought that was how it was done here."

Once I asked Fr. Nektary to give me his photograph, but he refused: "Better yet, you give me yours." Then he began to laugh and said, "Then again, I have your picture. You had barely walked in, and I took your picture right away. I have such a mysterious photograph."

I became very interested in this and kept on trying to wheedle a picture from the Elder. He told me to come in the evening: "I can't give you my picture because all I have is my large portrait, and it's inconvenient for me to give it to you. But I'll show it to you." He pulled out a large mirror, stood before it and placed me beside himself: "Well, there's our family portrait, and you yourself see that it's impossible to give it away."

Fr. Nektary had a white cat with black spots. It would lie at his feet. "Batiushka, the cat's listening to everything."

"And do you have one?"

"I have a good one, Batiushka; all the brothers love him. He follows me everywhere."

"Good—bring him to me; I'll have a look at him."

"What do you mean, Batiushka, the people will see him. It'll be awkward."

But he said, "Well, what of it? Come, and I'll receive you right away with the cat."

I came. He said, "Where's the cat?"

"Peter Ivanovich (Feldschers) wouldn't give it to me—he said you already had a cat."

"A-a! Well, all right."

"Batiushka, maybe it's sinful that he's so attached to me. Next time you'll take him and pet him and you'll like him."

"St. Gerasimus was great—he had a lion, and St. Seraphim had a bear. But we're little, so we have a kitty. It's all right, let him live where he is."

In the month of January we came to see Fr. Nektary with a novice, and he said, "Come see me in February; then we'll call

an airplane and fly south." I laughed so hard, and then asked forgiveness for my laughter. "Never mind, never mind—it's our spiritual joy." This meant that our hearts couldn't contain the joy of his grace. "And we'll go south," he continued, "it'll be so nice. After all, in February it's already spring there and the flowers are blooming. And in May we'll fly back. Everyone will be happy and cry out, 'They've come, they've come!' but we'll say, 'No, no; we didn't just come, we flew in.'"

At first we could in no way understand why he was saying all this to us. But look what happened later. That novice had a brother who was a novice, not in Optina. Then her brother, saying nothing to anyone, went south in February. His sister wept much over him, but he wrote that all was well with him there, and she calmed down. And in May he unexpectedly returned and again settled in the monastery. How happy she was!

I also knew Elder Gerasim of St. Sergius Skete* and was his guest for two weeks. He once took a kamilavka and said, "Something's wrong here. It needs to be restitched somewhere." He gave it to me and said, "Take care of it." I finished it, and was getting ready to go to Vespers. He said, "Now you explain to me—what on earth is the significance of the kamilavka?" I said, "Batiushka, it's you who should explain it to me; I don't know either."

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* Abbot Gerasim (†July 31, 1918), when still a boy, was the cell-attendant of Elder Gerasim (†1898), who enjoyed great renown in the Kaluga province. He was tonsured in the St. Tikhon of Kaluga Hermitage and founded the St. Sergius Skete, located seven miles from Kaluga. He was the former manager of the Kaluga chapter of the Imperial Palestine Society, the president of which was Grand Duke Sergius Alexandrovich (†1905). Fr. Gerasim received into his Monastery "only homeless and completely disabled cripples." He was endowed with the gift of clairvoyance. A close spiritual tie existed between Elder Gerasim and Abbess Sophia (Grineva), who sent to him the former spiritist V. P. Bykov, who described his visit to St. Sergius Skete in his book, *Calm Havens For the Respite of a Suffering Soul.*

"All right, when you go home (to Optina), pay a visit to Fr. Nektary and Fr. Anatole and tell them that I beg them to explain what the significance of the kamilavka is, and write what they say to me in a letter."

"Bless!"

I arrived in Optina and went straight to Fr. Anatole, but as it happened he was celebrating an Unction service and many people were with him; this would go on for hours. (Fr. Gerasim had said to go to Elders Nektary and Anatole, but I had gone to Fr. Anatole first.)

I went to Fr. Nektary, and he received me right away, and I began to tell him that Fr. Gerasim begged him to explain what the kamilavka was all about. Fr. Nektary thought for a bit and said, "It's due to a misunderstanding that he's asking me."

"No, Batiushka, please explain it."

Then he said, "I have to give this some thought; but I'll give you an answer in a year."

Then I asked him for a third time and said, "Batiushka Gerasim ordered me to write the answer to him in a letter without fail."

Then he said, "When I entered the Monastery, I read spiritual books with the blessing of Elder Ambrose, and when I came to him for a blessing he asked me, 'What books are you reading?' I said, 'Batiushka, I'm reading, but I don't understand the meaning of certain words.' He said, 'You just read, and if you don't understand something, the time will come when you'll catch it. And here's what I'll tell you: go see Fr. Alexander; he'll explain it to you.' He sent me to Alexander, and now he's Anatole." And with that it was closed.

Well, I thought, there's something to write to Fr. Gerasim. I came to Fr. Anatole. The anointing was over. I related everything to him, how the matter stood from the beginning, and said, "Tell me, Batiushka—you explain to me now, what the

significance of the kamilavka is. I have to write to Fr. Gerasim, after all. What am I going to write?" And Fr. Anatole began to laugh so hard when I told him that Fr. Nektary had sent me to him, that I've never seen the like. "It's been said somewhere! Yes, yes, it's somewhere, it's somewhere!" And again he laughed. There were visitors there, and they were so amazed that they said to me, "What did you say to make him laugh so hard? We've never seen him laugh so merrily." I said, "It's the way I sent regards to him from someone." Well, what was I supposed to say to them? I had no time for a conversation.

Some nuns were preparing to go to see Fr. Gerasim. I quickly wrote the letter. I wrote it all, just as it happened. I gave them the letter. Four nuns went, and one carried the letter. They came to Fr. Gerasim and he told them to read it. And he sat on his bed, crossed himself and laughed: "Glory be to God, glory be to God; I've received an answer. How happy I am that the Elders remembered me!"

Once Fr. Nektary said to me, "Fr. Gerasim visited us." I was happy and thought, "Oh, if only I could have been a bug and crept into Fr. Nektary's cell and seen how such marvelous Elders relate to one another." But he smiled and said, "I offered Fr. Gerasim a seat beside me on the couch, and he sat down. Then he was silent and I listened to his virtue. That's how we sat until my cell-attendant lost his patience and knocked, saying that the other visitors needed me."

One nun was a great woman of prayer, but had read quite a few books and had become proud. Fr. Nektary then began to say to her, "Aniuta, this will lead to trouble," and then he added, "but all your woes and sicknesses will cease before the 1940s." And truly, in 1937, all her anxieties passed and she died peacefully.

Fr. Nektary told me that he had a hard time with certain people, while with others his soul was at ease. "And with you I

have an easy time," he told me. I asked him, "Why is that?" and told him that I myself experienced a heaviness with certain people. He advised me to flee such people, "Or else your soul will be plundered."

On the Elder's last nameday before the break-up of Shamordino, the Shamordino sisters came to congratulate him, and he had them sing "It is Meet and Right" and "In Thee Rejoiceth" and he wept much. Before his nameday I would often come and ask, "Batiushka, what shall I give you for a present?" And he would say, "Will you carry out what I tell you?" I would say, "I'll make an effort to do it." "All right then, live just a little better, and this will be the most precious gift for me."

Once I wrote a letter to the Elder, but he didn't answer. I wrote another. Again no answer. I wrote a third. Again nothing. "Lord," I thought, "what's going on?" Then an opportunity turned up for me to have a little talk with him. I came to him and asked, "Batiushka dear, why haven't you answered me? After all, you answered me before." And he said, "Tell me—which would you like more: for me to answer you, or for me to send your letter off to the heavenly chancery? Make a choice." I begged, "Both one and the other, Batiushka." "No," he said, "it doesn't work that way; you have to choose." I, of course, understood that the heavenly chancery is more important, and I chose that they go there. Then he praised me: "You've chosen correctly. Everything is examined there."

Once in my absence a rumor went around in Shamordino that I had drowned in Optina. As soon as I learned about this I became upset and came to the Elder and told him, and he said, "But you really have drowned." "How, Batiushka?" I asked in confusion. "You've drowned in me."

Interior view of the main church of Shamordino Convent,
dedicated to the Kazan icon of the Mother of God.

Schema-nun Seraphima, then novice Irina (seated on the right), at the time she met Elder Nektary.

8

Shamordino Convent

RIASSAPHORE-NOVICE IRINA BOBKOVA*

Shamordino, the Convent near Optina founded by Elder Ambrose, was totally destroyed after the revolution. Yet the spirit of its valiant nuns, who were tucked away in the modern-day catacombs, emerged after communism fell in Russia and gave birth to today's Shamordino Convent. Situated on a high cliff overlooking a vast valley with a winding river, Shamordino's picturesque setting was always a consolation to its inhabitants. The oldest surviving nun, Seraphima, whose grave is now revered in the beautiful Convent, left brief memoirs of her days in the Convent in spiritual submission to Elder Nektary.

When I lived in Shamordino I didn't go to Elder Nektary, but turned to our confessor, Fr. Meletius. Later I went home to Gomel and came close to marrying a tonsured monk of Optina, Melchisedek. We had decided to be married in church, concealing our monasticism, and were hurrying

* Later Schemanun Seraphima (May 11, 1885-November 3, 1990). She was a novice in 1908 in the Kazan-Ambrose Monastery (Shamordino). After the break-up of Shamordino and Optina she lived for some time in Gomel, her birthplace. Tonsured into the mantia with the name Seraphima (1942) and into the schema with the same name (1977), she returned to Shamordino on July 24, 1990, where she reposed and was buried. Taken from *Little Flowers of Optina Monastery,* pp. 104-108.

with the wedding—there were only two weeks left before the Fast.* Only now did I take it into my head that I absolutely needed to receive a blessing for the marriage from Elder Nektary. I put on a plush fur coat, wrapped myself in a red kerchief, left for Optina and appeared at the "hut." I figured that at the general blessing I would ask a blessing to get married and the Elder would not understand who I was and would say "God bless you," and I would receive a blessing, even though by deceit.

But it didn't turn out that way. As soon as I said to Fr. Nektary, "Bless me to get married," he turned away and was silent. Finally Fr. Sebastian (his cell-attendant) led me over to him in the reception room and the Elder met me with: "Why have you, a Shamordino nun, come to me?" I was simply stunned. After all, he had never seen me before—let alone in a worldly dress. I said, "Batiushka, I've come to you to confess." "No, no, you go to Fr. Anatole—he's the confessor for Shamordino, and it's forbidden for me to receive you." I again begged, "Batiushka, if you won't take me, I'll go right home in the same state in which I came to you." Then he put on his cuffs and consented. I confessed, and then I immediately said, "I've been intending to marry your Melchisedek." The Elder just stopped, then closed the door with the latch and led me to the icons. I was frightened. "Here's how it is, my friend—either you promise to give up this thought or I'll have to excommunicate you. Now choose," and he became so severe.

I wept and begged him not to excommunicate me. Then he ordered me to move to Optina to stay with my sister.** My sister was a nurse. He told me to bring my sister to him, and then he said to me in her presence, "Come here to live, or you'll only

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* The Church does not permit weddings to take place during the fast periods.—Ed.

** Anastasia Bobkova, later Schema-nun Animaisa, reposed in 1978.

Schema-nun Seraphima (Bobkova). Photograph taken in December of 1988, when she was 103 years old.

have yourself to blame. I'm saying this to you in front of witnesses." And he repeated this three times.

I moved to Optina but Melchisedek began to write letters to me. Fr. Nektary told me to first bring him all the letters I received, and only then to open them. He would make the sign of the Cross over those I received from others and give them to me to read right away, but those from Melchisedek he put in his pocket and carried around for three weeks. Then he received me and said, "We have some letters we haven't read. Here, read." I began to read and couldn't understand anything; everything flickered before my eyes and the lines blended together. Thus I didn't even know what he had written there.

Then my mother came for me at Nativity to take me home; Melchisedek had given her seventy-five million for the trip. I came to the Elder, told him, and asked permission to go home, but he replied to me: "Go wherever you want." And he went into his cell. I waited for him and waited, but he didn't come out. I went home and after Vespers again asked to see him, but he wouldn't receive me: "I've told her everything already." Finally they prevailed upon him, and he received me and told them to summon my mother. As soon as she walked in he assailed her quite severely: "Why did you come here? To pray or to lure people out of the Monastery? All right, prepare for Communion with us and go home, but your daughter isn't yours now—she's God's." My mother gave in and left me in the Monastery. And so I didn't go home.

I began to have fears. Fr. Nektary had me recite the prayer, *O Lord, rescue my soul from fear of the enemy* (cf. Ps. 63:1), and then told me to recite every day at three in the afternoon *O Theotokos and Virgin, Rejoice...* three times, and then *Lord, have mercy* and *O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.* And he himself promised to pray for me at the same time.

When the Elder was arrested and put in the hospital my sister made her way in to see him and asked him how we should live from then on, and to whom we should turn. He directed her to Fr. Nikon (Belyaev) and said, "God's Providence led you to Optina, but let Irisha go home; she's here through a misunderstanding."

I wanted all the same to ask about myself and also managed to get in to see the Elder, and he told me, "Turn to Fr. Nikon, at first personally, and later in writing." I didn't know Fr. Nikon at all then and I was afraid. I began to argue with him: "It would be better for me to turn to Fr. Meletius." But he said to me, "That does not have my blessing. Turn to Fr. Nikon." So I passed into the hands of Fr. Nikon and was quite satisfied.

I later went to Kholmishche to see the Elder and ask for his blessing, and he asked me, "Who is your spiritual father?"

"Fr. Nikon."

"No, you have no spiritual father."

I was confused. Fr. Nikon was then still living in Kozelsk. The Elder then opened a book on St. John Chrysostom and said, "Do you see how Olympiada grieved when her teacher went onto the ship and into exile? And how Chrysostom suffered! There, in exile, the climate was unsuitable, and he became ill with a fever and other sicknesses."

"Batiushka," I said, "what are you showing me this book for? I can read it at home. It would be better for you to tell me something." But he continued what he was saying. Then Maria entered and demanded that we leave. The Elder sent us on our way and told us to go to Ivanovka—it was nine miles through the forest, and it was getting towards evening. We obeyed and left, and on the way met Fr. Nikon and Fr. Gerontius. They questioned us and had us return to Kholmishche; there we spent the night. Fr. Nikon said, "It looks like the Elder is foretelling exile for me. Well, I'll ask him myself." He came to Fr.

New Martyr Elder Nikon of Optina, disciple of Elder Barsanuphius.
A charcoal portrait done by his spiritual daughter in 1923.

Nektary and asked, "Why have you said nothing to me about exile, but confused my spiritual children?" But the Elder answered him, "Forgive me Fr. Nikon, I was just testing your spiritual children's love for you; I was joking." Then he pulled out a cotton skufia with earflaps, took Fr. Nikon's summer one from him, and put this warm one on his head.

Fr. Nikon was exiled from Kaluga to Solovki on the day of St. John Chrysostom.*

Another time I went to Kholmishche, but had to return on the eve of the Feast of the Archangel Michael. Fr. Nektary sent me off late, at ten in the morning, saying, "You'll be in Kozelsk by evening," and gave me some lump sugar for the trip. As it turned out, it lasted me all the way home. I walked and chewed it the whole way. Towards five o'clock I arrived at Volkhonskoye—this was seven miles from Kozelsk, and I was advised to go no further. It was winter, and already getting dark. I began to ask to spend the night, and thought to myself, "Well, the Elder's words weren't fulfilled; I won't be home by evening." And then some peasants drove up, friends of the owner of the house where I had stopped. They were going to Kaluga through Kozelsk, and they took me there. They were just beginning to ring the bells for the reading of the Gospel when I arrived in Kozelsk.

Fr. Nektary would often, at the general blessing, take Nastia (my sister) by the hand and say, "Here, honored visitors—I present to you this maiden. She has been sent here by God's Providence. She's a cherubim."

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* He departed for Solovki from the Kaluga train station with a group of prisoners on January 7, 1928, the day of the commemoration of the translation of the relics of St. John Chrysostom. Due to a cyclone the prisoners remained in Kemi, and after his term in the camp ended, Fr. Nikon was sent off to Pinega in the Arkhangelsk region. In exile he became seriously ill with tuberculosis and departed to the Lord on June 25, 1931.

Little orphan-novices in Jerusalem. School founded by disciples of the Optina Elders. Pictured here is Mother Xenia.

9

"You Shall Have Many Children"

At the height of Optina's flowering, when thousands of people were flocking to the Elders to receive instruction that would shape the course of the rest of their lives, a few humble peasant girls visited Elder Nektary—not as strangers, but as disciples. To them the Elder gave a blessing to "fly, and to have many children." They later became nuns and settled in the Holy Land. In their convent they had "many children" in their orphanage, and later, at the invitation of the righteous Archbishop Leonty of Chile, they "flew" way down south and recreated the convent, the orphanage and the school for "many children." The leader of these nuns became an Eldress-Abbess—Mother Alexia of holy life. Her disciple, Abbess Juliana, supplied us with the information below upon our request, when we were compiling the first complete book on Optina, Optina Monastery and its Era.*

THE FOUNDRESSES of the Dormition Monastery in South America, in Chile, made their monastic beginning with the blessing of the Optina Elders. In accordance with our request they informed us of several cases of Elder Nektary's manifest

* Taken from *Optina Monastery and its Era,* pp. 536-38.

clairvoyance. Their Abbess was Mother Alexia, a woman of exalted life, now reposed. The memoirs of Mother Xenia (Claudia in the world) were taken down by Mother Juliana.

"Mother Alexia was my aunt on my mother's side. She knew all the Elders, and often visited Optina before her departure for the Holy Land. She was Elder Joseph's spiritual daughter. The Elder instructed her, as did all the Elders, to be humble and obedient, to sit in her cell and do handiwork—with 'work in her hands and prayer on her lips.'

"Fr. Nektary was not tall. He would come quietly to the general blessing and pray to the Heavenly Queen at her icon, 'It is Truly Meet.' He did it like this: 'Help us, save us, have mercy on us...' and he would bless the people. We were often at Optina, since we were natives of Kaluga and lived there. Optina was thirty-five miles from us. We went both on foot and by train. I was sick and the Elder would receive me affectionately, and always said, 'Let's pray.'

"He personally blessed me for my trip—he said, 'Hurry to the Holy land, Claudia, or you won't go. Don't agree to stay with your relatives,' though I was very sick and young to be travelling alone. 'Come on, let's pray.' I knelt, and he covered my head with his epitrachelion and began to pray. He tightly, tightly squeezed my head and said, 'Claudia, what grace you'll receive; you know, the enemy hasn't liked you since your childhood, but grace will fight for you and will snatch you from him!' Then I told him how I was going alone, and that I was such a sick one. (I had suffered from leukemia from age 12 to 23.) He said, 'You'll fly there like a little bird,' and instructed me on how I should act on the ship. By his prayers I didn't feel the rolling of the ship, though it *did* roll."

The last time Mother Xenia was at the Elder's he gave her a ball of thread and said to her, "Here, wind this ball; look how tangled it is." She mentioned that after being sick with

Sashenka—the smallest nun in the convent in Chile. A six-year-old Chilean girl, an inheritor of Optina Elder Nektary's blessing.

leukemia she was quite weak and consequently this was beyond her strength, but he said, "Don't worry, don't worry; this is how your life will unfold—it will be hard for you at the beginning, but later it will be fine." And that's how it was.

The Elder foretold to Mothers Alexia and Xenia, then still young, that they would have many children. He said, "Now you're going to the Holy Land, and you'll have many children." The Mothers were horrified, since they had thought of dedicating their lives to God, not of having families. Only in 1933 did the Elder's prophecy begin to come true. An eight-year-old girl—later Mother Joanna—was brought to them, and Metropolitan Anastassy told Mother Alexia to take in Arab children to be educated. She did not want to, since she was painting icons all the time, but she did not dare disobey the Metropolitan. But when, in 1938, half a year after Mother Joanna had come, her cousin was brought, along with other children, among whom was the three-year-old future Mother Julianna, Mother Alexia recalled Elder Nektary's prophecy. It must be said that the Rule in the Gornensky Monastery, where they lived, differed from that of the Mount of Olives and Gethsemane Convents. The Monastery was self-supporting, and each sister had to earn her own living. Therefore each sister had the right to train a novice for herself, or even more than one. And so the Mothers had "many children." Now, having moved to Chile, they have organized an orphanage in honor of St. John of Kronstadt and a school in which eighty-nine children of both sexes are being educated.*

"When he taught and instructed my sister Lydia the bolsheviks were already in power; she continued to study while it was still possible. She was a secret nun. None of her relatives knew since, I think, that's how the Elder instructed and blessed her.

* This was written in 1953.

"Elder Nektary told my sister Lydia, 'Soon there will be a famine of books. Buy spiritual books now, or else you won't be able to buy them later for any kind of money.' He also said, 'I fear the red hierarchs.'

"Bishop Theophan of Kaluga did not believe in the holiness of the Elder. When he visited Optina and came to see the Elder, the Elder paid him no attention and busied himself with his dolls (which children had given him, as their most precious possessions, out of love for the Elder). He pushed one into prison, giving it some kind of sentence; he beat another one; a third he chastised. Bishop Theophan came to the conclusion that he was insane. But when the bolsheviks took the Bishop and put him in prison, he understood everything and said, 'I'm a sinner before God and before the Elder—everything he said was about me, and I thought he was insane.' Living in exile, the Bishop suffered much from his landlord, but did not complain. He lived with the Plokhin family.

"Elder Nektary also said, 'Russia will resurrect and will not be materially rich, but will be rich in spirit; and in Optina there will yet be seven luminaries, seven pillars.'"

Nun Michaila of New Shamordino Convent in Australia, who recently reposed there. She had been tonsured in Optina Monastery in 1919, with the blessing of the last Elders.

10

An Evening Party

by O. N. T.*

While compiling our monograph on Optina Monastery and its Elders, we experienced wondrous help from the other world from the Elders themselves, who would inspire people from all over the world to send us their reminiscences of the Elders. The account below came to us through a nun from Optina, who had come from South America to the only Orthodox convent in Australia, named New Shamordino. Nun Michaila (Kudinova) was the only nun to have ever been tonsured in Optina, which occurred with the blessing of Elders Anatole and Nektary. The very fact that, in far-off Australia, there would be a convent named after Shamordino, attempting to preserve its typicon, testifies to the love that people had for the Elders; a love which conquered space and time.

THIS WAS IN THE SUMMER OF 1915 during the war with the Germans. There were three of us: my mother, my twenty-eight-year-old sister, and myself (twenty-two years old). My sister frequently became ill with bouts of blindness, fainting, and something like lethargy. The attacks came almost every month. The sickness had begun when she was eighteen. Ten doctors and four professors had treated her during the last ten years, and

* Taken from *Optina Monastery and its Era,* pp. 523-26.

aside from the endless expenditure of money, trips abroad and dashed hopes—nothing!

My mother, a very religious woman, had heard much about the Optina Elders and decided to go to Optina. She took me with her. I was dying to take a nursing course so as to get involved in the war. My mother did not permit me and said, "If the Elder blesses you, then I'll let you; but if not, then you're not going. But while we're on the road we'll stop at Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra to pray." We came to Optina through Moscow and Kozelsk, from which we took a hired carriage to the Monastery and crossed the Zhizdra by ferry. We were amazed at the height of the trees in the forest surrounding the Monastery. We stayed in the monastery guesthouse, where we learned that Elder Anatole was ill and was not receiving visitors. "But while he's recovering, go to the Skete to Fr. Nektary," advised the guest-master, which is what we did. It was said that Fr. Nektary had recently come out of reclusion and was now receiving pilgrims in his cell in the Skete. We found thirty people already in the Elder's reception room, awaiting his appearance. Someone in the crowd said, "Batiushka is going to take a walk with us today." We waited for ten or fifteen minutes. An old man, short of stature, came out, and with him his cell-attendant. The majority of the crowd knelt, including my mother. The Elder took in everyone with a glance, walked up to my mother and said, "You came to pray for your sick daughter? She'll be fine—bring her to us; but in the meantime, come here for an evening party, and before that we'll take a stroll." The words "evening party" greatly surprised everyone, and one woman (a peasant) said to my mother, "I suppose you've brought your engaged daughter to Batiushka for a blessing?"

The Elder blessed everyone in turn and left for his cell. His cell-attendant came out and asked everyone to come at six in the evening—"Batiushka will be going for a walk." We

all returned at six. Fr. Nektary came out, looked at everyone, came up to me, took me by the hand and led me over to a soldier (a gendarme). Joining his hand with mine, he thus led us to the door and beyond, along the road through the forest. The whole crowd walked behind us. We strolled for ten or twenty minutes. The poor soldier was embarrassed and blushed, and it was rather uncomfortable for me. When we came back there was already a table standing in the cell under the icons, and there were cups of tea, cakes and candies wrapped in paper. Fr. Nektary seated me and the soldier in the front corner under an icon and ordered his cell-attendant to bring in a gramophone (some kind of spiritual hymns—I don't remember what). I felt awkward; everything seemed so strange. The Elder took seven gingerbreads from the table (white ones, with pink glaze—the kind that are sold throughout the villages in Russia) and gave them to my mother with the words, "Take them to your sick daughter and let her eat one each day, and receive Holy Communion more frequently. She'll be well. Go to Petersburg and bring her here to prepare for Communion." With these words he left us and we all arose and departed. Many from the crowd congratulated me and Mother, saying, "Batiushka has engaged your daughter; you'll see, now she's going to get married." And that's just what happened!

After our arrival back home at our estate we learned that, during our absence, my sister had felt well the entire time. She ate the gingerbreads with faith (there were seven of them). After the seventh she received Holy Communion. Right up to her death the former attacks were never repeated. She was able to finish the conservatory and taught singing after the revolution.

In autumn of that same year the three of us (my mother, my sister and I) left for Petrograd for the winter, and along the way, as Elder Nektary had instructed us, we stopped by at Optina.

Having rested from the road, Mother took my sister to the Skete to Fr. Nektary, and I left to wander around the Monastery and to find out if Fr. Anatole was receiving people, since they had told us that he was still sick and was not receiveing visitors. When I approached Fr. Anatole's cell I saw a few people sitting and waiting in his reception room. All, of course, were local peasants. This was going to be the Elder's first appearance since his illness, his cell-attendant said. I went in and sat in the reception room, and in my soul I thought, "How good it is that I've gotten to the Elder alone, without Mother. The Elder, of course, will bless me to go to the war when I ask him, and Mother will have to let me go against her will." I saw the door from the cell to the reception room open, and out came a little old monk in a podrasnik and a wide leather belt, and he turned right towards me with the words, "Well, then, come in!" My heart rose to my mouth, as they say, at Elder Anatole's words. But I saw that he had an unusually kind smile, impossible to describe! You had to have seen it! I walked into the cell after him. He closed the door behind us and looked at me, and in an instant I understood that I could not conceal anything from him, that he saw right through me.

I felt as though I were transparent—I looked at him and was silent. And he smiled at me with such affection and said, "Why don't you listen to your mother?" I continued to be silent. "Here's what I'll tell you—your mother knows better than you. The war is no place for you—there aren't just soldiers there, there are also officers; this is not in keeping with your nature. When I was young I wanted to be a monk but my mother didn't permit it, she didn't want it; and so I left for the monastery after she had died. Now you're going to tell me you want to get married?" I was silent. "You love him now for his good looks. Marry him when you feel that you can't live without him. I know of one case: the husband was at war and was killed.

His wife died at home in that same hour. When it's like that with you, then get married."

With these words the Elder took a chair, climbed up on it, and took from the top shelf a wooden icon of the Kazan Mother of God, about two feet square in size. He had me kneel and blessed me. Then he said, "When you get to Petrograd, don't think you won't have anything to do—you'll be busy."

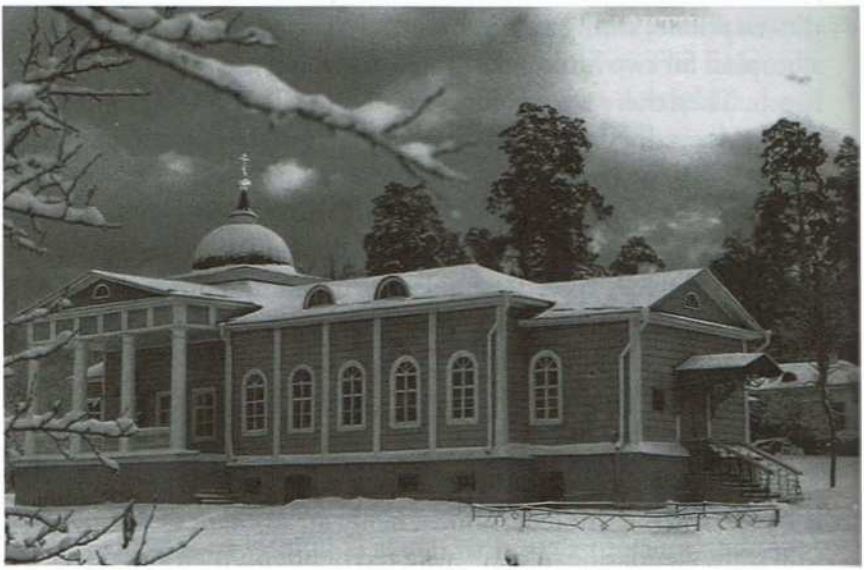
On the very day of my arrival an acquaintance called me on the telephone, asking me to come each day to help the nurses in a hospital for two hundred soldiers, replacing the nurses during lunch. Then there was a second telephone call—to work in Empress Alexandra Feodorovna's hospital supply room (rolling bandages in the medical department of the supply room).

Fr. Anatole's words proved true. In the morning I would leave for the hospital (the Meeting Hall of the Nobility) until half past twelve, then I would run home and towards one o'clock would go to the supply room at the Winter Palace until six in the evening.

Australia. Home for the aged.

Note: When the author of these notes was married her fiance was wearing shoulder-knots, being an adjutant of the division staff. Gendarme soldiers wore red braids on their shoulders that were like shoulder knots. In church, at the wedding, she recalled Fr. Nektary's "evening party." She had given her consent to her fiancé long before her trip to Optina. No one in the family knew of this....

She never knew what Fr. Nektary had said to her sister. Her sister never married, though there were prospective bridegrooms.



Snow-clad Optina Skete on the eve of great turmoil, when all true Christians "went within themselves," into their inner world, concentrating on the hope of the Jesus Prayer.

II

The Jesus Prayer

NUN THAISIA*

The traditional monastic inheritance, especially that of Optina and of St. Paisius Velichkovsky, is based on the Jesus Prayer. Both the practice itself and the variety of spiritual experiences accompanying it are a mystery known only to clairvoyant elders and God. The account below bears witness to a rare example of prayerful fervency, and must be understood in the right Patristic light. It is not a teaching for everyone to follow, but a first-hand account of fervent prayer, usually experienced by beginners.

FEBRUARY, 1918. I went to see the Elder, Fr. Nektary. He received me alone and taught me the Jesus Prayer. He instilled it into my very heart, from which I sensed that the Prayer was acting by itself, without forcing it. He asked, pointing to my heart, "Why is it so good here?" and he laughed. I left him in a joyful state, just as if I had caught a precious little bird and was afraid to let it (that is, the Prayer) out of my heart. I wanted to abide in it always, for my whole life. After this he received me a few more times and instructed me in the Prayer. He inspired my mind with his thoughts, and I understood the Elder without words. He was very happy and left me to live by myself.

* From the Journal of Nun Thaisia of the Kashirsky Convent (written in Optina). Taken from *Little Flowers of Optina Monastery*, pp. 108-112.

August, 1918. As soon as I came to see Elder Nektary, he received me right away. He sat at his spot at the table, seated my sister opposite himself in a chair, and placed me on my knees near him and ordered that the door be closed and the little rug be set straight. Then he gave me letters to read; he opened them himself and blessed each letter, and I read them. I read through four or five of them. Then he had me take a pillow from the couch and sit on it by him. I sat down and he took hold of my head with his right hand, and covered me with the sleeve of his riassa—my whole head. He began to write in uncial script and had my sister read letters. I asked him regarding the monasteries, whether they would be scattered or not.

He replied, "Yes, my dear, they'll be scattered. The monasteries are now in great danger. Even our Optina is appointed for a decision this month. Come to us to live for good, Thaisochka." (This was when I asked him where to go if they scatter us.)

I replied, "With joy, dear Batiushka!"

He said, "Olechka will miss you." When I reminded him about my ailing throat, he laughed and said, "You'll have to go to Petrograd for a year to be treated, and you'll have to put on a worldly dress there, since they don't allow people to go around in monastic clothing." And, turning to my sister, he said, "Olechka, you're not against her going to Petrograd?"

"God deliver her, Batiushka."

"Well, if you don't want her to be in the world, then release her to live with us for good. After all, you only need a little cell," he said, turning to me, "right?"

"Yes," I said.

"You'll also be a cell-attendant for me; I need someone to make soup, and danger threatens the monasteries. So you stay with us to live for good. Danger threatens our Optina, too.

Thaisochka, help us—pray. No, seriously—help. You know, we stand before the Lord as people, but you are like an angel of God before the Lord. I've always considered you, Thaisochka, to be an angel of God. You see, dear one, you're pure." And he said many nice things. He said, "Is it all right for you to sit like that?"—under his hand. Then he would first cover my face with his hand, then uncover it and take a look, then quickly cover it again and press my head to himself. He kissed my right hand and then arose (I was doing the Jesus Prayer the whole time) and asked me if I knew how to write in uncial script. I told him that I did. "Well, I'll get some paper ready for you and give you some work to do in your room; only Olechka won't get angry, will she?" He took hold of my head and said, "The little bird of God knows neither care nor labor." He went out, and had my sister read a book on prayer, and seated me in his spot. Two and a half or three hours passed that way. The brothers arrived, and the Elder came and dismissed us, leading us out of the cell himself almost by the hand, and said, "From this day on you'll stay here for good." We left him in ecstasy.

From that day I came to the "hut" each day and, sitting in a corner, unceasingly did the Jesus Prayer, sensing that the Elder was instructing me in it. I could in no way tear myself away from it. And at every general blessing he squeezed my hand tightly and looked at me very affectionately; and if I had prayed very earnestly, then he was even more affectionate towards me. The second time I came to him alone, without my sister. He seated me on a chair, and himself sat in an armchair, and laid my head on his shoulder. He closed his eyes, and went entirely into a state of prayer. I too did the Jesus Prayer. Finally, I felt a radical change in my thoughts. I began bitterly, bitterly to weep, thinking that, on the whole, no one felt sorry for me; that they thought that all I was doing was "amusing myself." When I felt an even more intense resentment, the Elder pressed me to

himself all the more forcefully and strongly. I wept bitterly and felt that only he alone sincerely felt sorry for me, then I calmed down and again began to pray the Jesus Prayer with a contrite heart, and I became so engrossed in the Prayer that I forgot my own existence. All of a sudden I sensed that my soul was in Fr. Nektary's hands and that we were standing before the Lord. Yes, it was I who experienced this, and I call the Queen of Heaven to witness that this really happened. I saw only a brilliant light and knew that we were standing before the Lord. I felt that I was clasped tightly to the Elder and that he was beseeching the Lord for something for my soul. I did not dare to look at the light but only humbly, with fear, sensing my own nothingness, entreated unceasingly, *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.* The time I spent not on earth lasted five minutes. I awoke, as out of some dream, with this contrite prayer in my heart, joyful and astonished, when I heard Fr. Nektary's words: "Why, I've got to carry you in my hands." He himself was happy, joyful and all aglow. He didn't give me a chance to say a word; he quickly left, kissing me on the forehead. Yes, but even before that he pressed my face to his cheek. I tasted a sweetness in my mouth, as of honey. And that happened two times. When he came in he was carrying five plums and, hurrying me, went together with me to the general blessing. He was so happy, so joyful—I had never seen him that way. O God, how great he is before the Lord! After this I was ever-present in the "hut" and unceasingly did the Jesus Prayer. The next time he received me again, only this time with my sister. He seated me, like the first time, near him, and had my sister read letters. Then he left, seating me and my sister on the couch—me first, and my sister closer to the icons. He smiled and said, "Wait here for a little while." He went into his cell. I began to do the Jesus Prayer. (He had told me earlier that he would confess me before I left.)

I prayed for a long time and became all flushed from the prayer, and even began to perspire. All of a sudden the thought struck me—the Elder is going to confess me right now. And no sooner had I thought this, than I suddenly saw (I was sitting with closed eyes)—the Cross, and on the Cross the crucified Lord with a crown of thorns. Fr. Nektary was standing by the Cross in an epitrachelion, a radiance around his head, and was looking at the Lord's face. I fell down before the Lord, before His feet and wept. I wept so bitterly that tears like hail poured from my eyes. The Elder moved closer to me and, as a witness, listened to my sins, and they all came to light; even all my forgotten sins came to the surface. I repented before the Lord, and implored forgiveness. My heart was heavy and pained that I had angered the suffering Lord by my sins. My God, how I wept. But then Fr. Nektary placed the epitrachelion on my head and absolved all my sins. I calmed down and thought: "If this is real, then the Elder, when he comes out of his cell, will touch my head and it will mean that all my sins are forgiven." The vision changed. My tears subsided. I calmed down, but did not cease to do the prayer, and began mentally to ask Elder Nektary to show me Paradise. I saw a strange sight: gardens, ponds, parks, forests and flowers, and in the heavens the holy saints of God in white garments, like those of patriarchs. I didn't see their faces; I only saw that they were going somewhere quickly. Again this came to an end. I saw the next thing—that is, I asked him to show me hell. I saw dark, gloomy chambers, and then fiery lava, and in it, dark figures with eyes shining like electricity and long claws. They were sitting right in the fire, their eyes fixed on me, but I was not afraid.... I asked the Elder to change it again, and to show me what would happen to the sisters if they scatter the monasteries. I saw six or seven people going into the forest and hiding themselves. I asked him to show me where I would live. I saw a kind of half-earthen hut. I further asked him to show me

my Guardian Angel. And then there stood before me my most pure, radiant, humble, meek Guardian, all in white, with slightly bluish wings, fair curly hair, meek, with great humility in his face—and for a long time I could not tear my gaze away from him. One can only say and understand about him that really, only angels could be like that. Suddenly he flew up to my right shoulder and pressed himself closely to my head and I sensed a voice saying, "Where he leads you, there go." Again it changed. I asked, "Batiushka, will there be a Tsar?" And I heard, just like the blows of a hammer in my head, "Antichrist! Antichrist! Antichrist!" And with this, everything ended. The Elder soon came in and, coming up to me, touched me on the head. I was terrified—did this mean that all this was real?

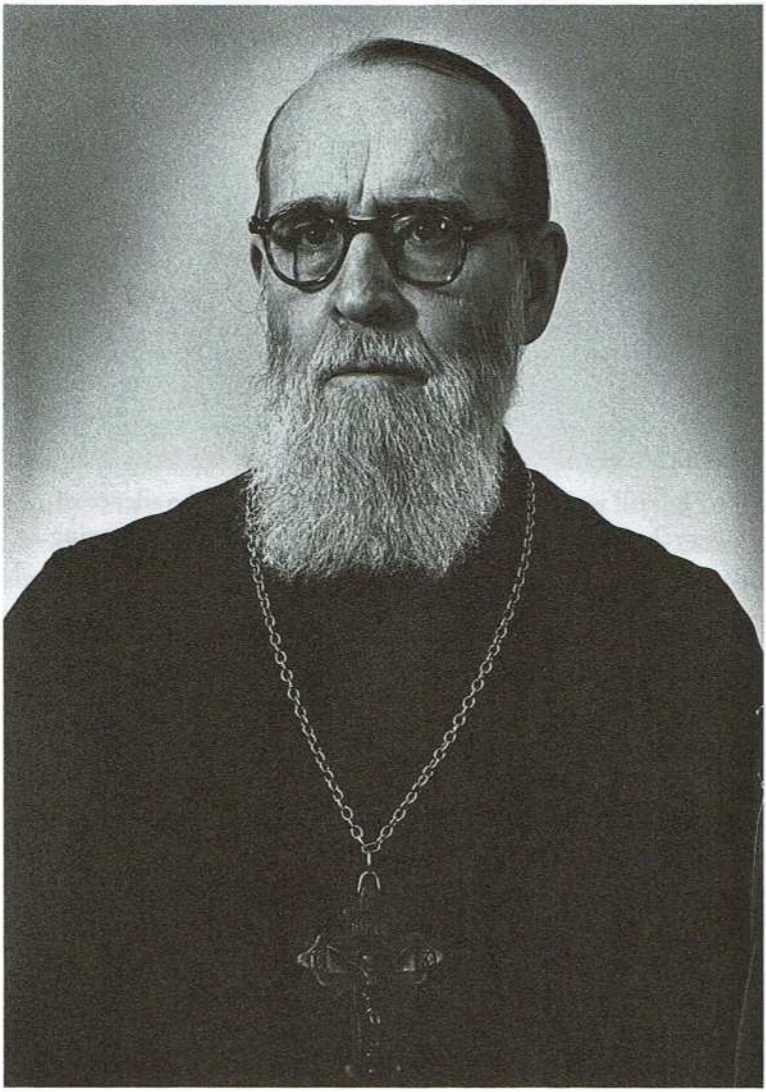
Oh yes, I left something out. Earlier I had done the Prayer simply, but now he taught me like this: I stand in my mind before the Lord and pray to Him in such a way that I have nothing else in my mind besides the Savior, and I accept no other thoughts. I even saw it like this: the Lord was sitting on a throne, and lengthwise around Him stood all the angels; and I, looking upon this from afar, unceasingly did the Jesus Prayer. Then I prayed at the Crucifixion, or perhaps simply held the depiction of the Lord in my mind, humble and meek, and entreated Him. Then I ascended in mind to the heavens, and there again conversed with the One Lord.

Now it is clear to me that I have only to remember that in the world, when I pray, I am standing there with the Lord—then it is good and wondrous in my soul, and I must not think of anything else. Fr. Nektary also showed me the countenance of the Savior to the waist, but due to the blinding light there was no way I could look.

When I left I asked him to give me something as a blessing. He took hold of my prayer rope, which hung around my neck—his gift—and said, "Be satisfied with this." And, taking

The still waters of the skete pond, reflecting the silence of hesychastic striving so typical of Optina's monastic longing.

hold of one bead of the prayer rope, he said, "To some one bead is given, but you've received them all." Pointing to the prayer rope, he said, "What you have physically is good, but the spiritual aspect is full of grace."



Archpriest Sergius Shchukin, missionary to youth in Canada. Photograph presented by him to the St. Herman Brotherhood in 1978.

12

"Step By Step"

ARCHPRIEST SERGIUS SHCHUKIN*

When the bloody revolution began to inundate Holy Russia, the young generation had to adjust itself from the nobility of a patriarchal society to the frenzy of militant apostasy. The sons and daughters of Holy Russia were forced to find new ways to make their lives meaningful. A series of brotherhoods sprang up to preserve self-identity: Some of these brotherhoods sought to "renovate" the ancient Orthodox world-view; others rushed to the remaining carriers of Holy Russia, as this account relates.

After the second World War, young Russian immigrants came to America to escape communism and found themselves in a deluge of affluence and pluralism. We immigrants were also in need of elders, for the devastating result of renovationism was tragically apparent. We did not have elders, but we did have those "elders" who had known and touched real elders, and we fled to them for help. That is how I met both Fr. Adrian and Fr. Sergius Shchukin.

Fr. Sergius was a leader for the young generation that clung to the Church. He shared with us, in writing and in person, how he was saved by Elder Nektary through the simple method of dreaming big and acting patiently—"step by step." The following passage is an account of how he solved the dilemma of preserving Orthodox

* Written by Fr. Sergius for the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood.

self-identity in a non-Orthodox society. His way proved correct in my own life, and eventually enabled me to come out with this book.

I FIRST LEARNED of the existence of the Optina Elders when I was a student in Moscow. There I became acquainted with some young people from the very believing and pious D. family, from the city of Kozlov. Two brothers and two sisters were studying in Moscow, and one of the brothers was my classmate. I learned from them that they were all—eight brothers and sisters—spiritual children of Elder Anatole (Potapov) of Optina. They visited him every year and did nothing without his blessing. They strongly advised me to visit Optina, but the conditions of student life somehow always prevented me from making this journey. Studies in the special technical institute demanded a great deal of time, and during vacation I always went home or for on-the-job training for students. Only after graduation, already under the bolshevik regime, did circumstances allow me to get to Optina.

In the summer of 1918, when the whole Russian land had already been shaken to its foundations, there stood before me—as it stood before all of the intelligentsia—the question: What do we do now? Many categorically refused to go to work in the new bolshevik institutions, counting on them to fall from power soon; others awaited foreign intervention and bided their time. When the private and public institutions were closed, the unemployed intelligentsia preferred to trade in all kinds of junk or to live by selling their possessions than to serve the bolsheviks.

Finally the moment arrived for me as well, when the institute in which I worked was to be closed. Of course, having an engineer's diploma, I could easily get along, but where, precisely? There were many possibilities—my colleagues and professors summoned me to various newly opened soviet

General view of Optina Monastery.
The churches and bell tower, seen from the east.

educational and scientific-technical institutions. But all of this attracted me little; I wanted to preserve my inner freedom and fortify my spiritual life, which was still weak and unstable. In those days I especially began to think about the necessity of going to Optina to take counsel with the Elders.

It happened that our institution, having announced its liquidation, ordered its employees to appear in three days to receive their wages. So as to make use of these days I resolved to go to Optina with my friends; these were Misha D., a student at Moscow University, and his compatriot, a merchant, no longer young, who was threatened with total ruin in connection with the revolution. In a word, all three of us stood at a crossroads and no longer knew how to act in the face of the approaching revolutionary chaos.

We succeeded with great difficulty in boarding a freight train to Kaluga, since it was impossible to find a seat on the passenger train. In order to have the right to visit Optina, we had to appear before the municipal executive committee and obtain a permit—but I won't dwell on this. Towards evening, we finally reached the Monastery and spent the night in the monastery guesthouse. Everything was still as it had been, but in view of the troubled times, visitors were few. Two Elders lived in the Skete then—Anatole and Nektary. The majority of those who came sought to see the older one—Fr. Anatole; but we, for some reason, decided to turn to Fr. Nektary. Entering the Skete, which was located outside the Monastery, we saw the small gardens and houses of the Elders, familiar to us from Bykov's book, *Calm Havens,* as well as from the description of the Skete in Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov.*

As was probable with all the rest of the visitors to Optina, each of us bore in our souls confusion, pain and uncertainty—products of the first months of the revolution. Many of them, like our older travelling companion, were seeking an

answer to the main question—will the soviet authority last long?... And many were convinced that the Optina Elders must surely know....

Unfortunately, I did not in due time make a detailed record of our visit with Fr. Nektary. I considered that my memory was such that it would preserve those unforgettable impressions. The main things, of course, were preserved, but by no means everything. We went to the monastery services and prepared for Communion, but my impressions from our encounters with the Elders remained in my soul most of all. We entered the reception room in the Elder's little house. There were ten or twelve of us, men of various callings. After a few minutes of waiting a small, slightly stooped old man with a small gray beard and wearing an epitrachelion came through the door with quick, inaudible steps. After praying before the icons he blessed us all and began to come up to each one in turn. We stood in a line lengthwise across the room, and the Elder passed from one to another and spoke with us. The conversations were short; Fr. Nektary rarely lingered with anyone. Interrupting the occasionally long stories of his visitors, he hastened with an answer; his replies were quick and not verbose, after which he immediately moved on to the next one in line.

I was struck more than anything by the manner in which Fr. Nektary conversed with everyone: he walked up to the person with whom he was speaking and, without looking at him, stood somewhat sideways near him, half-turned, and inclined his ear to him, as if he were either hard of hearing or was simply giving the speaker an opportunity to state his needs without speaking too loudly. Listening to him, Fr. Nektary gazed somewhere downward, but gave the impression that he was listening to you not with his ear, but with some other inner organ of perception; that, in fact, it was not your words themselves that

were important to him, but something else, concealed in your soul, that the Elder was trying to perceive....

When Fr. Nektary came up to me I began, as briefly as possible, to explain my situation to him; but, as often happens in such instances, my brevity was not accompanied by clarity. I endeavored to explain myself better; but the Elder, having already understood me somehow, himself began to speak. As I have already mentioned, my difficulty lay in the kind of work to choose, and by what to be guided in the process. Fr. Nektary answered me roughly this way (I don't remember his actual words, but this is the sense of them):

"Yes, yes, of course you should work ... after all, you're an educated man. Only don't chase after anything big ... step by step, take it easy...."

That was it—and he moved on to the next person. At first it even seemed to me that I hadn't received any kind of answer to my needs; or rather, I had expected something more from the Elder than these simple words.... But I remembered that elders very often don't answer directly, but allegorically, compelling one to ponder the true meaning of the answer. Indeed, reflecting further on his reply, I soon became convinced that I had received an entirely clear and definite answer to my uncertainties. Once I had understood this, I instantly felt an extraordinary lightness, joy and peace. All the confusion and conflict of the surrounding revolutionary atmosphere ceased to exist, and my personal problems became simple and clear.

Such also were the feelings of my companions. They both returned home strengthened and in a peaceful state, though they had essentially not received the answers they were seeking. For example, the Elder gave no one even the slightest hope that the new regime would soon come to an end. On the contrary, Fr. Nektary spoke to many of the necessity for patience, prayer, and preparation for even greater trials.... But, nonetheless, the

general state of all who returned from seeing him was cheerful and joyous. We returned from Optina, to encounter again the chaos of the bolshevik revolution, but we perceived everything in a totally different way. And I recalled the words of the Gospel: *Fear not, little flock!* (Luke 12:32).

The effect of my conversation with the Elder grew even stronger within me after my return to Moscow, and remained as something that had entered solidly into my life. My whole subsequent life served as proof of the wisdom of Fr. Nektary's advice. That which happened to me after my return to Moscow revealed to me the significance of my trip to Optina to an even greater degree. That is why it is essential to relate all of this in more detail.

On September 1, 1918, we arrived in Moscow, and I took leave of my companions. They left for their homes in the Tver region, and I set out for home so as to be at my institute by twelve o'clock to receive my wages. However, in order to understand what follows, I must stop and elucidate the political situation in Moscow in those days.

Fearing an attack on Petersburg, the soviet government had been transferred to Moscow that summer. But there was unrest in Moscow as well. In the month of August there had begun a series of anti-bolshevik demonstrations—an uprising in the environs of Moscow by the so-called "left S. R.'s";* the bombing murder of the German ambassador, Count Mirbach (to whom was attributed a great influence on the politics of the bolsheviks); and finally, an attempt on Lenin's life by the S. R. Kaplan.** In answer to this, the embittered bolsheviks declared the "red terror": the Cheka went on the rampage in Moscow and the provinces. Everywhere there were arrests, raids and

* Social Revolutionaries.—Ed.

** Fanny Kaplan's attempt on Lenin's life was due to personal reasons as well—it is generally believed that he had raped her.—Ed.

shootings; prisons and local Cheka cells were overfilled. In those terrible days it fell to me and all my fellow-employees to land in the famous Lubyanka—the internal prison of the Cheka.

It all happened quite simply. When we had gathered at the institute to receive our wages, it suddenly turned out that the whole building was surrounded by chekists—this meant that we had been caught in a raid. They rounded us all up—about eighty people—in one hall, and began to search us and confiscate our documents. Then they loaded us by groups into open trucks and took us under convoy across the whole of Moscow to the Lubyanka. There they re-registered us and assigned us to cells. All night in the courtyard below there was the noise of motors; vehicles came and went and new groups of arrestees were taken in....

I won't describe in detail those six days that I spent in the Lubyanka. I will only say that the inhabitants of our cell were changed daily—some were freed, others were led out to be shot; a third group, those needing investigation, were transferred to the Butyrka prison to free up space for new arrivals. It should be noted that at that time the justice of the Cheka was, if not merciful, at least swift. Those arrested were rarely detained long and were often released without any investigation....

In the midst of the diverse population of our cell there of course reigned a depressed, heavy atmosphere. Some, who had been implicated in something, were silent and withdrawn. Others, who had landed there by chance, pestered everyone with their evidence that they were not guilty of anything. Still others, who likewise did not feel themselves to be guilty, were greatly agitated for their own sake and for the sake of their close ones. Among those arrested were regular officers, intellectuals, merchants, clergy, members of the bolshevik party, foreigners, and even one thirteen-year-old Jewish boy who had been arrested

for being on the street after the curfew. But it seemed that I was the only one among them who calmly endured both sudden arrest and all the oppressive circumstances of the Lubyanka. That spiritual peace which I had borne away from Optina was preserving me from fear, and I was completely untroubled. My friends who remained in freedom were far more upset for me. I was confident that everything would end up quite happily for me.

Among those who were there with me I recall in particular two bishops, still rather young, without a single gray hair; unfortunately, I have forgotten their names. They were both in a distressed state and were, for the most part, silent. I tried several times to initiate a conversation with them, telling them that I had only just returned from Optina, and about my impressions there; but they were very uncommunicative. I understood later that I might have seemed quite strange to them due to my calmness and frank conversation, so that they might have even thought that I had been specially sent to them.... Two days later they were summoned for interrogation at night—and they never returned. The following day the man on duty appeared in the cell for their "things"—on the bunks lay their outer riassas. This meant that they had been shot that night. Such incidents occurred with us every night, since at that time there were still no special cells for prisoners condemned to death.

I was summoned twice for interrogation at night. The investigator was a quite young and intelligent man; I later learned that he was one of the first futurist poets of those years. With a bored expression he studied my notebook and questioned me about everyone whose address was there. But most of all, he was interested in my political beliefs and with which political organizations I was connected. I maintained that I had no connections and that I was acquainted only with scientific and Church circles. In those first years of the revolution it was still

possible to speak openly of this, since Church circles were not yet looked upon as counter-revolutionary. But two or three years later this view changed, and the persecution of all Church figures began.

In view of the overcrowding of the cheka, I was quickly transferred to the Butyrka prison, where I stayed for about ten days. It also was overcrowded; in each cell there were twice as many as there were normally. They fed us much more poorly than in the Lubyanka; therefore, those who did not receive parcels could barely walk after a few months. Here I began to receive parcels from my friends. In the first parcel, among other things, I received a New Testament, which they allowed through without detaining it. Subsequently even that privilege, accepted in every country, was abolished.

When they transferred me back to the Lubyanka, they announced to me that I would be freed. The next day I received my documents and my personal effects that had been taken from me—my watch, my penknife, and so on—and a pass to leave the cheka building. With a feeling of relief and gratitude to God I walked out onto Malaya Lubyanka Street. The September sun was shining. The subdued and poorly cleaned-up city of Moscow was facing a difficult and hungry winter. Those who had been with me in prison had given me a series of addresses so I could visit their relatives. One of my co-workers remained another two months in Butyrka, although all of our other employees were released. They released him at last in November; it turned out that they had missed his name on the list of those to be freed....

My recollections would not be complete if I did not relate how I fulfilled Fr. Nektary's advice in actuality. It is well known from the practice of eldership that the counsel of an elder must be fulfilled without fail, or else every kind of misfortune will overtake you. But if you follow the advice of the elder, God will

help you and it will be as if *all things work together for good* (Rom. 8:28). I verified all this in the experience of my own life.

Soon after being freed I found a job. But, remembering the words of the Elder, I took the most modest and least promising position of secretary at the technical soviet of one of the "glavki" of the V.S.N.Kh.* The main advantage of this position was that the glavka was located on the same street on which I lived. Nevertheless, many of my engineer-colleagues and my acquaintances were quite astonished by my choice, considering that I could have gotten a much better job. But it is always like that—the ways of God seem, at the very least, "strange" according to human reasoning. But as soon as the bitter winter arrived, all the advantages of my choice instantly became clear. As soon as the snow fell, all movement of the streetcars ceased for the entire winter—there was no one to clear the tracks. People who worked in various commissariats in downtown Moscow were forced to expend an enormous amount of time and energy in walking. It was even worse for those who had two jobs and, from morning until evening, had to cover long distances on foot.

But I gained even more in a purely spiritual regard. My uncomplicated secretarial duties were not tiring, and thus a comparatively large amount of time and strength remained to me, which I invested in Church life. That year, thanks to the wise guidance of His All-Holiness Patriarch Tikhon, Church life in Moscow revived to an extraordinary degree. Moscow was covered by a net of brotherhoods, groups and unions, since the Patriarch had abolished parish boundaries and permitted the formation of inter-parish brotherhoods. To the activities of these brotherhoods, which were led by the most zealous pastors,

* For those unacquainted with soviet terminology, I will explain: the V.S.N.Kh. is the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy, and glavki are Chief Bureaus of the separate branches of industry.

there were also attracted wide groups of laymen: they sang, read on the cliros, led discussions and even gave sermons. In the evenings Akathists were celebrated, sung by all the people, and there were discussions afterwards. For the children, who had been deprived of catechetical lessons, discussions were organized, with slide shows of pictures from sacred history. The youth assembled separately and occupied themselves with the study of church rubrics, the Gospel, etc.

I participated closely in the Brotherhood of St. Alexis Metropolitan of Moscow, at the head of which stood Archpriest Roman Medved, the former rector of the Sebastopol Cathedral. A few other parish churches were added to the Brotherhood from various parts of Moscow, where members of the Brotherhood carried out their work. In the Brotherhood's own church an early Liturgy was celebrated daily, and members were able to attend church even before work. Three times a week in the evenings there were Vespers services and discussions; the members of the Brotherhood tried to receive Holy Communion monthly, and took an active part in the work.

Thanks to the light workload of my job, I had an opportunity to dedicate my strength to working in the Brotherhood, and thus this period brought me enormous spiritual profit. Here I grew stronger spiritually and began to live within the enclosure of the Orthodox Church. It was also then that I placed a beginning to my activity in preaching, especially after 1919, when His All-Holiness Patriarch Tikhon ordained three of us, members of the Brotherhood, as readers, naming us "evangelists." Such "evangelists" then appeared in many brotherhoods and gave sermons from the church ambos.

Thus, fulfilling Fr. Nektary's advice, I had the opportunity to strengthen my bond with the Orthodox Church and I received an extremely valuable preparation for my future missionary work. And during my whole subsequent life in the

Soviet Union, his words always came true—as soon as I would begin to ascend the ladder in regard to my work, I would experience unpleasantness and complications. But when I was satisfied with little, life would go on peacefully. But this is a particular topic which I will not dwell upon here.

In conclusion, I will again touch briefly upon the further spiritual bond which was formed altogether unexpectedly between myself and Fr. Nektary, and which continued right up to his repose. Although my first and last encounter with him had already bound me to the Elder with invisible ties, by God's will he did not abandon me in his prayers to the end.

In 1920 I left Moscow for my birthplace in the northern Caucasus, where I continued to live. At almost the same time one of the members of our Brotherhood—Mrs. T., the daughter of a priest—left for the Tula province and was soon secretly tonsured. Living not far from Optina, she became a spiritual daughter of Elder Nektary and frequently visited him. When the Monastery was closed she did not cease visiting the Elder at those places where he later lived.

We corresponded from time to time, and I always received a blessing from him in her letters. Knowing how I respected Fr. Nektary, she informed me that he was praying for me and my family, and she sometimes risked sending me icons or instructive leaflets from him. In this manner, over the course of almost eight years, I continued to feel the grace-filled support of the Elder and sensed the prophetic action of his prayers in my life. In 1928, T. informed me of the death of this last Optina Elder. And it was precisely in the following years that my life became noticeably complicated, and the most difficult years of my life began. It seems to me that the cessation of the Elder's prayerful spiritual support played a part in this....

Evgenia Grigorievna Rymarenko, just before she married Fr. Adrian, and prior to her first visit to Optina.

13

How to Retain a Confessive Life

EVGENIA GRIGORIEVNA RYMARENKO

When the ruthless, fanatical waves of destructive communist change threatened to uproot and destroy Holy Russia, Elder Nektary was sent by God as a comforter. His task was not only to survive and retain faith, but also to find ways to lead a Christian life and progress in it. Thus his main emphasis was to gather and fortify young pastors that they, like generals, might command respect and instill in people faith in God's Providence. The account below illustrates how Optina's Elders guided God-fearing young men in the feeding of their suffering flock. These are fragments of a travel journal written in Optina by the young wife of the newly-ordained Priest Adrian during the terrible revolutionary times, which she published thirty years after the Elder's repose. These visits were life-sustaining injections of energy, whereby the Elder taught his disciples to be trusting and patient. This Fr. Adrian later taught us, the Christians of the latter times: ***"Sit quietly and do your monastic work, and wait until God will raise confessing bishops."***

My acquaintance with Optina Monastery began in April of 1919.

I will say a few words about myself. I am the daughter of prominent landowners of the province of Poltava. I attended

the Women's College in Petersburg and then moved to Moscow. The circles in which I moved were not church-related. In Petersburg I had been involved in occultism; but in Moscow, though I had already become disillusioned with it, I nevertheless still lived outside the Church.

After the death of my parents, and after all sorts of trials bound up with the revolution, I returned to the city of Romny in the Poltava province. There I met my present husband, Fr. Adrian, who gave me several books of spiritual content to read. I felt drawn to go to Optina Monastery. Why I went then to Fr. Anatole, I do not know. I had almost no understanding of elders. I had only read Lodyzhensky's trilogy (*Higher Consciousness, Invisible Light,* and *Dark Powers*) and Nilus' *On the Bank of God's River.* For the most part, I had the desire to go to see an elder to have a look at him and to hear some kind of prediction about the future from him.

Instead of predictions about the future, I experienced joyous moments of repentance and an extraordinary state of peace and submission to the will of God. I was so won over by the Elder that later it was enough to recall him to acquire a peaceful, radiant state of soul.

I corresponded with the Elder and sent him packages of provisions. My marriage also took place with his blessing, and he was registered as the godfather of our eldest son Seraphim, who has already reposed.

In 1922, before the Dormition Fast, I received a letter from Fr. Anatole, which ended like this: "... It would be good for you to come for a rest in our Monastery."

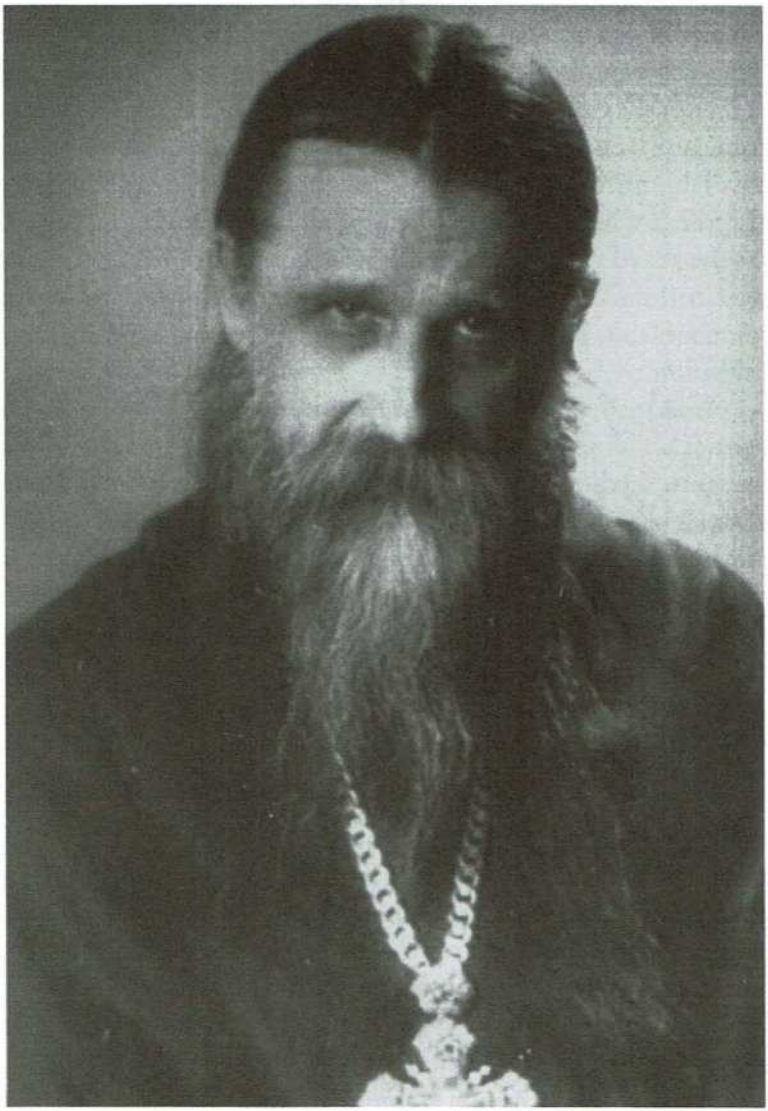
I didn't get ready right away; I didn't understand why he had summoned me, but when I arrived at Optina it was already too late—the next day would be the ninth day since the death of our dear Batiushka. Fr. Anatole had reposed on July 30, 1922.

It was sad; I could sense the loss of a close one, whom no one could replace. I ran into various people who had come for the ninth day, and from conversations with them I learned that I was not the only one who had been late. There were other latecomers as well, whom Fr. Anatole had summoned either by letter or by having appeared to them in dreams. But there were also those who had found him still among the living.

I learned that Elder Nektary, the confessor of the brothers, was in the Skete, but it was depressing to think of going to someone else. It seemed that no one could replace dear Batiushka.

At that time (1922) Optina was a museum, but continued to exist as a monastery thanks to the fact that the manager of the museum, Lydia Vasilievna Zashchuk, was a believer and strove with all her strength so that there would be at least one church in which the Divine services could be held and, on the whole, so that the brothers might live within the monastery enclosure. The metochion of the Shamordino Convent still existed then at the Monastery. It was run by Schema-nun Maria, a very spiritually wise Eldress, who lived with her cell-attendant, nun Olga. It was with them that I stayed.

August 9. I went to the Liturgy, then to the cell of the reposed Fr. Anatole, and finally sat in Fr. Nektary's "hut." I sat and sat, and it was all for nothing; the Elder wasn't receiving anyone. Anxiety took hold of me. Why, I'd been here three days already, in the "hut"; I'd sat there through the evening services and didn't know when to prepare for Holy Communion or when to go home. Though the thought flashed by that he was testing my patience, this thought was replaced by another: "Fr. Anatole is gone—I'm not going to achieve anything; I'll leave with nothing." A kind of irritation made its appearance and I decided, "All right; now Fr. Nektary will come out for the general blessing. I'll get a blessing and tomorrow I'll leave. It's all



Fr. Adrian at the time he knew Elder Nektary.

the same—no one can replace Fr. Anatole for me." The clock struck ten and Fr. Nektary came out. He blessed everyone silently, but to me he said suddenly, "Well, now what?! You were too late for Fr. Anatole; blame yourself. What have you come to my unworthiness for? He was a great Elder, but I'm just earth-born." "Lord," I thought, "how on earth did he sense my doubts? How did he know my thoughts?" I said, "Batiushka, receive me!" He smiled. Going back to his cell, he said, "You wait; if she leaves now, I'll receive you." Lydia Vasilievna, of course, didn't leave, and went into his cell; he turned to me and said, "You wait, I'll be right there."

We waited. There were only two of us—myself and Liza, a novice from the "Joy and Consolation" Convent. Liza spoke about how she had nowhere to go, how the bolsheviks had liquidated her monastery. I felt sorry for her, and wanted to tell her to come home with me, but said nothing, thinking that, after all, the Elder himself should decide how she should live. We sat there and the clock kept striking. Time was passing; it was dark, and only the lampada before the icon "It is Truly Meet" was burning.

The clock struck twelve, the cell-attendant had long been asleep—he wasn't coming out anymore. My soul was peaceful and calm. I thought, "What's the difference—let him call me when he wants to. It's late, after all, he needs a rest."

Finally he came out with Lydia Vasilievna Zashchuk (the manager of the museum) and said to me, "It's late already, you'd better go home."

"Well, I won't beg you, Batiushka, you need to rest."

He turned to Liza: "See how Matushka humbles down? Isn't this the third time you've come?"

"Not the third time, Batiushka—the third day."

"Well, never mind, never mind—after all, you missed Fr. Anatole."

He turned to Liza: "What are you mourning about—perhaps you could go with Matushka? Will you take her?"

I replied, "I don't know, Batiushka, whatever you say," but I thought to myself, "What do I need her for?"

He turned to Liza and said, "No, no, go to Kaluga; you can't live in the world. We'll find another helper for Matushka."

I thought, "Lord, what kind of helper? I never said anything." We went home.

I went to bed calm and at peace. There was the hope that once and for all he would receive me; he just couldn't let me leave like this.

August 10. I again sat in the "hut." Fr. Nektary had already come out twice for a general blessing. The cell-attendant had announced me—it didn't help. If someone had asked, "What did you do in Optina?" I could have answered, "I sat in the 'hut.'" How much I had experienced; how much I had gone through in that time!

It was already five o'clock and I had no more strength. Again all kinds of thoughts sprang into my mind....The Rule was ending in church, and again the people were descending to confess. That meant that they would be called and I'd sit through the Vigil here again, and nothing would happen.... Lord, how I wanted to see him, but I had no more power to endure! I didn't know what to do. Most likely, I'd simply go and confess the next day, receive Communion on Friday, and go—after all, the train to Kozelsk only runs on Fridays and Tuesdays. But to stay until Tuesday was terrifying—what was going on at home?

Suddenly his cell-attendant came out and called me. Lord, is it possible? There was the fear that I might not get in to see the Elder again. I couldn't forget anything; I had to fulfill everything that Fr. Adrian had entrusted me to do. I entered the room with trepidation. Fr. Nektary wasn't there. The room was

in semi-darkness. A lampada was burning before the icon of the Mother of God, "Quick to Hear." Some time passed, and I calmed down somewhat....

The Elder came in: "Well, what's with you, Matushka? You were too late to see your Elder, Fr. Anatole. He wrote to you, didn't he—but you didn't come. (How did he know that he had written?) You yourself are to blame. I'm just starting out, you know—I myself am mourning that I've lost my spiritual father, and you come to me! You should have gone to Kiev; you've got lots of spiritual people there—fifty-two bishops!"

I had no strength to restrain myself and began to cry. He stroked my head affectionately, sat me down and said, "Well, well, tell me about it." I immediately felt better. I said that I didn't know where to start. Should I speak about myself or about Fr. Adrian's commissions? He said to me sternly, "Since you're the one who has come, speak about yourself; and if your Fr. Adrian wants to, let him come, and not send you." We spoke for a long time. He questioned me so sympathetically, and everything that had tormented me, that had seemed bitter and offensive, suddenly became so unimportant, so easy to bear.

I felt a kind of joy and a love for the Elder. His cell-attendant knocked and announced that some woman was in a hurry to get to Sukhinichi and begged him to receive her. He gave his permission and she came in.

Did that mean I had to leave? Fr. Nektary turned and said to me, "Here, read some letters to me." He opened them and gave them to me: "Here, figure it out—I'll be right back." He left with the woman. I sat there and deciphered the letters—they were quite ungrammatically written. No Elder. I took a book from the table—*The Letters of Elder Ambrose*—and leafed through it. I came across a letter that pertained to Fr. Adrian's questions that he had posed to the Elder: "But if by

some chance someone initiates conversations about the Church, especially concerning a proposal of some kind of change or innovation, then you have to speak the truth." How odd, that it was precisely that place that opened up to me! Fr. Nektary came in, and I heard how he was sending the woman off to confess to a certain hieromonk; then he came up to me and asked, "Well, what are you up to?" I told him what I had read and asked where I could buy such a book.

"What do you need that for? Those are Elder Ambrose's letters to laymen. Why don't you collect all the letters your husband receives and we'll get together and publish them and call them 'Letters to the Honorable Priest Adrian.' He receives letters, doesn't he?"

"He does."

"Then you collect them." He smiled, and I sensed such kindness and love. He suddenly took the book and had me read aloud the same letter that I had opened right up to. I read it from beginning to end. He stood up and said to me, "Help me, or I'll never have the time; take that letter—here's paper, ink and a pen for you—copy it all from beginning to end and bring it to me right away. Go over there, to the window." I went, with the Elder right behind me, and he sat me down. I finished copying it and, when he was free, I bravely went over to him: "Batiushka, I've copied it." "Well, what a bright girl—now write the word 'copy' also; and when our unworthiness signs it, you take it to your Fr. Adrian and say that we wrote it to him."

"Batiushka, what about Fr. Adrian's cross? Have you already worn it?"

"The cross? Where is it?!" He started looking: "Lord, have mercy! Lord, have mercy! Lord, have mercy!..."—he found it. "Here—you stand here before the icon on your knees, before Grace." I knelt there in a trembling, prayerful state. I felt him put the cross around my neck and then he blessed me with it.

"There you go—don't take it off; go to Fr. Adrian that way." I arose from my knees, took off the cross, and begged him to wear it for a while. He again began to speak of his unworthiness.... He had a peculiar way of humbling himself, and it bewildered those who came to see him; but I had already begun to get used to him and began to entreat him to put the cross on. It ended with his consent, and he seated me beside himself.

"Batiushka, I'm so happy to sit with you, but I know that everyone's waiting."

"Never mind, never mind—we'll sit together as long as my cell-attendant lets us. Well then, tell me some more about your virtues."

"Batiushka, all I have are sins—not virtues."

Again a conversation began—kind questions and decisive instructions ... new horizons were opened up. I had faith in God's Providence; every word out of the Elder's mouth had meaning. "And as for Fr. Adrian, he'll soon be an archpriest, won't he?"

"What do you mean, Batiushka? Even now our clergy are displeased that he's received awards so quickly."

"Yes, yes, it's always like that—the clergy are displeased. And how are you getting along? Is there enough bread? Doesn't your husband write in any magazines? Does he serve often?"

I said that he now serves daily and always commemorates him. He thanked me.

His cell-attendant knocked several times and announced someone. I just didn't want to leave! Fr. Nektary had me stay in Optina until Tuesday, August 16, and told me to prepare for Communion on Sunday the 14th.

Was something going on at home? I felt, however, that there was nothing to be worried about—on the contrary, how joyful I felt! His cell-attendant came in and announced someone, and

this time didn't leave. Fr. Nektary blessed me and said, "Don't worry, everything will be fine." Then he stood before the icons and said, "Have mercy, O Lord, on Thy servant priest Adrian, and preserve him by Thy grace."

I was blessed to go, and suddenly I was afraid that he might send me to Fr. Palladius to confess, like the other woman. "Batiushka, don't send me to confess to anyone else!" "No, no—come to me." Glory be to God!

I went to church for the end of the service. How good I felt! What extraordinary joy and gratitude towards God! I thought no more of home; it seemed like I would stay here forever. I'm probably a poor wife and mother.

1923. January 29. Sunday. I have continued to be with the Elder every day. I just don't get it—how is this; why? For what reason do I have such joy? I frequently sit for hours with him in the room; I often write for him or read. Sometimes I'm not alone, but with someone else. But he never leaves me without attention. Once the following thing happened: We were together with Marusya from Kaluga. Fr. Nektary sat me down to write, while she loudly read the Canon to the icon of the Mother of God "Quick to Hear." Fr. Nektary sat down right then and pretended to read a book. These were some extraordinary moments. Then he gave Marusya a letter to read from the magazine *Russian Monk* on church singing. I was writing and thinking, "This letter is being read for me so that I'll pass it on to Fr. Adrian, who's interested right now in the question of church singing." Fr. Sebastian called the Elder out for the general blessing. He got up to go, and Marusya asked him if she should wait with the reading. He replied, "No, no. Read—you're reading this for Matushka." He turned to me and said, "Remember how we sent the letter of Fr. Ambrose to Fr. Adrian? Now we'll send this one too."

How happy I was that new copying lay ahead for me; that I could again sit with the Elder, since I was already finished with my copying. I had copied something from the Life of St. Sylvester of Rome—his argument with the Jews. Fr. Nektary has one Jew who wants to be baptized and, according to the Elder, he needs proof of our faith.

February 3. Friday. Today I said farewell to the Elder and spent the time from eleven to four o'clock alone with him. How could I imagine that this evening I would be sitting in the railway station and not in this sweet, dear little room?! I had barely had this thought when he gave me a letter to read and said, "See what kind of letters they write to me!" I read, "My dear Batiushka—I remember your 'hut' and I'm so sad that I've gone...." and so on. I laughed and tossed the letter aside. He asked, "Are you going to write to me?" I said that it embarrassed me that some stranger would read my letter to him. He said that he would read my letters himself. Then he said, "Would you like me to write you a letter myself? Only don't be offended by my scrawl."

He always spoke so kindly about Fr. Adrian and begged so earnestly that he not join the "Living Church." "You know, all the priests who come to see me and who had joined say, 'It's as if we've lost something.' It's grace that has left them."

I asked him not to forget to bless me in my absence. "I will, I always will. As soon as it's nine o'clock in the evening, know that I'm blessing you." What a joy; how nice!

When he read the prayer before travel he interrupted it and said to me, "See, we're praying to the Lord that you come to see us again."

How strange it turned out: three of us left—Vera Ilynichna, a nun and I. Vera Ilynichna was at the Moleben together with me but the nun was late and only came up for a blessing. When the Elder was blessing Vera Ilynichna he suddenly said to her,

"You're leaving; drive her"—pointing to me. Why did he say that? Of course he knew that the treasurer, Fr. Panteleimon, had promised to take me to the station with the monastery horse. I came home, the horse was ready, and the treasurer and Mother Olga drove me to the station and left, leaving me to wait for the train, which was leaving at two o'clock in the afternoon.

The ticket office opened and I went up to get a ticket, but suddenly found out that the price of tickets had gone up and I didn't have enough money, since I had distributed my extra money to the monks and left myself barely enough. Vera Ilynichna came to my aid and gave me some money, and then we were reminded of the Elder's words, "Drive her." But the nun, poor thing, had to go back and spend the night in Optina, since she didn't have enough money either. But after all, she hadn't been at the Moleben....

We decided to come to see Fr. Nektary for Fr. Adrian's nameday. We arrived on August 24 (1925), towards evening. He met us affectionately and was pleased that we had come together. He began to discuss with me what groceries we had to procure to celebrate the nameday of the "most reverend archpriest" (although Fr. Adrian was not yet an archpriest). He called Andrei Efimovich and gave him various orders regarding purchases. On the nameday there was a Moleben with an Akathist to the Vladimir Mother of God which Fr. Adrian read, after which we were with the Elder. As usual, he had me do some copying, while at the same time he conversed with Fr. Adrian, who resolved his pastoral questions and read to the Elder the letters he had brought.

In the evening, in the landlord's part of the house, we all had tea and pie with Fr. Nektary. The Elder told a story about a girl who had died and then came back to life to repent for one sin and then died again. Then there was another story about a

Evgenia Grigorievna Rymarenko (†1963), at the time she published her diaries, which had been rescued from the Soviet Union. She reposed not long afterwards.

priest whose recently reposed predecessor appeared to him to show him the location of his lists of departed souls, for whom he had not yet prayed. Fr. Nektary called me Fr. Adrian's secretary and treasurer, which was how it actually was, since I had to be up on all his doings. I really wanted him to bless us both together. This he did, saying that from September 1 a new year would begin for us, since according to the church calendar September 1 was the beginning of the Church New Year. He confessed us and, as he escorted us, said to me, "All is well with you, and I rejoice that your Batiushka is fully Orthodox."

We had to leave on August 27 since we were hastening to the main feast day of our church on August 30. We both left permeated with a kind of peace and joy. We recollected the Elder's words the whole way. I, recalling the book *The Tollhouses of Theodora,* thought: "One can really note in this book what it means to have a spiritual father of exalted spiritual life, like she had in Basil the New. After all, it was only thanks to him that certain of her sins were forgiven. What good fortune it is that we have Batiushka."

This time Fr. Adrian and I came to see Fr. Nektary in September of 1926 with our eldest son, Seraphim. We wanted the Elder to bless him and, if possible, to confess him. He was five-and-a-half years old at that time. The road was very difficult for horses then. We broke down and the driver frightened us with tales of wolf attacks. Fr. Adrian was very nervous. We went very slowly, but finally reached Kholmishche. When Fr. Adrian told Fr. Nektary about his fear on the road, he asked, "Don't you have a cross?"

This visit of ours to the Elder left an impression of his extraordinary concern for us, for our whole family. It was nice to see how kindly he treated Seraphim. We all slept in Fr. Nektary's reception room. At first Seraphim and I lay down in the front room on the floor, but when the Elder stopped receiving

people I dragged him into the reception room. I remember how Seraphim confessed for the first time. He came out in such a concentrated state. When I went in after him, Fr. Nektary told me to first lay Seraphim down to sleep and then come in to confess. Laying Seraphim down, I couldn't restrain myself and asked him what Fr. Nektary had questioned him about. He told me that he had asked him if he loved his mama, and he answered that he didn't. I was terribly surprised but Seraphim told me, "I often don't listen to you." This discernment of a five-year-old child astonished me! When Seraphim undressed and lay down, Fr. Nektary came, leaned over him and made the sign of the Cross over him. At that point I had the thought that here, with the Elder's blessing, the life of a conscious Christian was beginning in him. I had faith that by his prayers everything would be fine. Help, O Lord!

We came together for the Elder's nameday on November 29 and stayed for two weeks. Many people visited from Moscow, Kozelsk and Gomel. Everyone prepared themselves and received Communion from Fr. Nikon, including Fr. Nektary, from the reserved Gifts brought by him from Kozelsk. Before Fr. Nikon had come, the Elder suddenly announced that he himself would only confess his host (Andrei Efimovich), Maria Efimovna, Fr. Adrian and myself, and that the others should wait for Fr. Nikon. Everyone was upset and troubled, but everything was later straightened out.

Fr. Nikon and Fr. Adrian served a festive All-night Vigil and Liturgy in the morning. The Elder was so radiant and full of joy. He came to the common table and had tea with everyone. Gradually everyone began to leave, but Fr. Adrian had so many questions regarding the future arrangement of our life that he awaited their resolution. We stayed for the Elder's second nameday, that is, December 6. The Elder's name in the world had been Nicholas.

Again all present prepared for Communion. This time, on December 6, Fr. Adrian served the Liturgy and communed everyone. An interesting incident happened with one artist, Nina Vladimirovna (from our region). She sat and reasoned that it made no difference to whom she confessed. And sure enough—she was the only one whom the Elder refused to confess—he sent her to Fr. Adrian. On our trip to see Fr. Nektary this time we managed to get a picture of him: a group sketch of him together with Fr. Nikon and Fr. Adrian. We also got a wax cast of his head. I begged Nina Vladimirovna to do all this without first getting the Elder's blessing, since he did not wish to have his picture taken, saying, "The Holy Fathers commanded us not to do this." There was a great deal of unpleasantness with Maria Efimovna, who declared in a loud voice that the cast was an affront to the Elder—that this was done only with communist bosses! I ran in fear to the Elder with the cast and the drawings. He told me to hide them and not show them to anyone, but permitted me to take them with me. I was very happy, since, although one could not say that the picture was well drawn or wax well cast, they resembled him all the same, and there was no hope of receiving another picture of the Elder....

DELIVERANCE FROM IMPRISONMENT*

I once went to see the Elder. He said, "Ah, it's good that you came, Fr. Adrian—get ready for your examinations." I said, "But I'm through with school. I don't have any examinations." He was always saying things like that, and I would think, "He must be trying to tell me something." I didn't push, but I had a kind of premonition or dread about what he had told me.

* From the oral recollections of Fr. Adrian Rymarenko.

A sketch made in 1926 during a visit to Elder Nektary (lower left) by Fr. Adrian (upper left), whose wife and little son Seraphim receive the Elder's blessing, while Hieromonk Nikon stands by (right). The latter received a martyr's crown after the closure and liquidation of Optina.

I went back to Kharkov, and when I got there I was summoned to a meeting by the chekists, the secret police. They had a root cellar in a field there, with a table and a lamp in it. They would do this to terrorize people. You had to walk down into a dark place—it was like a dungeon, enclosed.

I went down ... there was a table with some papers on it. There was a man in spectacles sitting calmly at the table. I was taken down there by two or three others. The man looked up. He had been reading something and he said, "Ah, Fr. Adrian—welcome, welcome ... you're very welcome. You're a very special person. We've been wanting to meet you for a long time, to have a friendly talk. You are a very well-known person, but you are often absent. You travel around. Perhaps you've been visiting Christians privately, and celebrating services?"

They knew that I was a priest. They could have picked me up before, but hadn't. The interrogator said, "Oh, don't be nervous, Father; don't be alarmed. We just wanted to have a friendly talk." I said to him right then, soberly—not angrily, but in a nice way—"Sir, I don't know your name. But, whoever you are, let's be manly, and let's be straight. There can be no friendship between darkness and light, between atheists and believers. We can be civil, and we can be proper. Whatever you want to ask me, I'll give you straight answers—but let's forget about this 'friendly talk.'"

Then I understood what the Elder had meant about examinations. When the interrogator heard my answer, he said, "All right, if you want to have it your way, then we don't have to have a friendly chat." He pushed a paper towards me and said, "Sign it!"* I gently pushed it back and said, "I won't sign." He nodded to one of the people there, who pulled out a revolver and put it right to my temple. "Sign," he said. I didn't answer. I

* Most likely, Fr. Adrian was being told to sign a document incriminating others.—Ed.

closed my eyes tightly. I had a prayer rope that Elder Nektary had given me, and I said *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner* to myself. I expected them to shoot me. I don't know how long I was saying the Jesus Prayer. I didn't hear a shot; I didn't hear anything. When I had said that I didn't want to have a friendly talk the interrogator had become quite upset and had pounded his fist on the table, scattering the papers. After a while I opened my eyes. The papers had all been straightened up nicely. He was sitting there and looking at me. The others were all standing around. I looked at them, and they looked at me. Silence. It was so quiet. I felt such calm. The interrogator said, "We know your kind, and we'll get you. We'll get you like the others, and we'll get you using the law. We're watching you closely, and as soon as you transgress in the slightest, you will be picked up legally to be imprisoned and liquidated. Get out."

I left. I understood that things were even more serious now. I had to be more careful myself, and more careful not to get other people in trouble by visiting them or showing friendship....

A self-portrait sketch of artist Leo Alexandrovich Bruni.

14

The Mystery of Spiritual Searching

St. Theophan the Recluse, highly venerated as a great authority on spiritual life, once said the following: "Spiritual life is such a realm into which the wisdom of this world does not penetrate." There are certain mysteries which are fully understood only by persons of high spiritual caliber, such as Elder Nektary, to whom these mysteries are revealed.

What the following accounts have to say about these mysteries is therefore of great interest. To us mortals with feet of clay, this realm seems closed, and it is only slightly opened at certain moments for the benefit of our souls. The whole realm of Patristic literature hints at these subjects, but the mastery of them belongs to the saints. We just wonder at them and wait until God grants us spiritual maturity.

At the turn of the century many artists and representatives of the "Silver Age" of the Russian intelligentsia, disillusioned with the narrow-mindedness of materialism, turned their soul-searching to spiritual quests, and some returned to their Russian roots, to Orthodox Christianity. The mystery of the true nature of the human soul, which has been warped by modernity and its unfulfillment, captured some artistic souls and carried them to the doorsteps of the Optina Elders. The bits and pieces that have come down to us show us how Elder Nektary met these educated, gifted people, and how they, in turn, benefited spiritually.

1. LEO A. BRUNI

Leo Bruni was a talented artist, whom I. M. Kontzevitch met when he first visited Optina. The latter was deeply impressed by a combination rare in those days—artists who combined spiritual principles with their creative work.

Leo Bruni was a spiritual son of Elder Nektary. His daughter Nina, who was born in the vicinity of Optina, just less than a mile away, remembered the Elder:*

"I was born in 1922 and, of course, remember Elder Nektary from my childhood.... I saw him, and recall that he spoke very softly, even if he wanted to explain something. He spoke quietly, but with determination.

"My father wanted to marry my mother, but her parents were very much against it. Mother's father, Balmont (a famous poet), said, 'Why rush and deprive the girl of her youthful maidenhood? She can get married later—why rush?' They used to meet somewhere when they took walks, near some special pine tree. Her mother's friend, Olga N. Anenkova, used to spy on them, and wondered where they managed to hide. They would climb that tree to conceal themselves.

"My father was a spiritual son of Elder Nektary. He once came to the Elder to ask him what he should do, since her parents were against their marriage. The Elder winked and answered, 'What if you kidnap her?' and he chuckled. It was like a long-awaited answer. He made everything ready; the horse and everything were prepared. Then, saying that they were going for a walk, they rushed to church. With joy they arrived and asked the priest to marry them, stating that they had Elder Nektary's blessing. But the priest said, 'Too late—Great Lent has begun!' Then they understood the Elder's chuckle!

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* From the memoirs of Nina L. Bruni, narrated in October of 1997.

"On the fortieth day after [the Elder's] death we went to his grave. There were many people there and there were two crosses on the grave. I noticed that the koliva* on his grave had strawberries in stead of the usual raisins. There was no village nearby. It was bright and sunny.

"We lived not far from Optina, but it was closed. Throughout my life my parents did not speak much about the Elder. It was dangerous, and they were afraid that it might hurt us. They always called him 'Batiushka,' but did not add his name. In my childhood we had a strongly reverent feeling for Elder Nektary. We were seven children all together—only four remain alive now."

When Optina was to be liquidated and monasteries disbanded, then Elder Nektary, foreseeing bad times for his spiritual children, sent monks and nuns to various families. Thus Fr. Vincent was sent to Fr. Adrian (Rymarenko) and Nun Thomaida was sent to be a governess for the Bruni children. She objected that it would hurt her spiritual life, but she nevertheless obeyed and was a good teacher for the Bruni children. They knew that she was a secret schema-nun and never revealed that they once saw her praying in her schema at night. (Her account follows later in this chapter.)

2. S. I. FUDEL

Sergius Iosifovich Fudel was a high-society gentleman who came to Orthodoxy as an adult and left a very insightful collection of his thoughts entitled "At the Gates of the Church."** In this remarkable little book he gives a few glimpses of Elder Nektary, whom he knew personally:

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* Sweet boiled wheat with nuts and raisins, prepared on days when the dead are commemorated.—Ed.

** *Nadezhda* no. 2, 1980.

"Concentrated, inextinguishable warmth in the heart is actually the grace of God that, settling in it, makes the heart simple and sincere. Fr. Nektary would teach, 'Beg God to give you grace.... Pray simply: *O Lord, give me Thy grace.*'"

"Optina Elder Nektary used to say, 'A simple Hindu man who believes in the Almighty and fulfills his will however he can, will be saved.' And then he added, 'But he who knows about Christianity and takes the path of a Hindu mystic will not be saved.' This same Optina Elder said about Alexander Blok, 'He is now in Paradise. Tell that to his mother so that she will have hope.' He showed interest in Velemir Khlebnikov, and the latter went to see Fr. Paul Florensky (who also knew Elder Nektary).*

"When I was twenty years old I came to Optina and visited the reception room of Elder Nektary. There was no one but me there. I waited for a short time, amazed at the unheard-of silence of the place. The Elder, whom I was seeing for the first time, came out to me at a quick pace. He blessed me and, immediately, without either preparation or any inquiry on my behalf, said, 'Do you have a bride?' And without waiting for an answer he continued, 'Go to His Holiness Patriarch Tikhon and ask him to ordain you. The path of the priesthood is opening up before you.'

"I was silent, dumbfounded by this unexpected statement!

"He said, 'Don't be afraid; go by this salvific path, and God will help you in everything. But if you do not go, then you will experience great suffering in your life.' With that he got up, blessed me and went away.

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* Alexander Blok was a famous modern Rusian poet of the early part of this century. Though he fell in with contemporary schools of godless thought, he turned to God at the end of his life, and was a close spiritual friend of Nadezhda Pavlovich. Velemir Khlebnikov was a futurist poet, also of the same time period. Fr. Paul Florensky was a sensitive spiritual philosopher who was shot in the Solovki concentration camp in 1938, and was later canonized as a New Martyr.

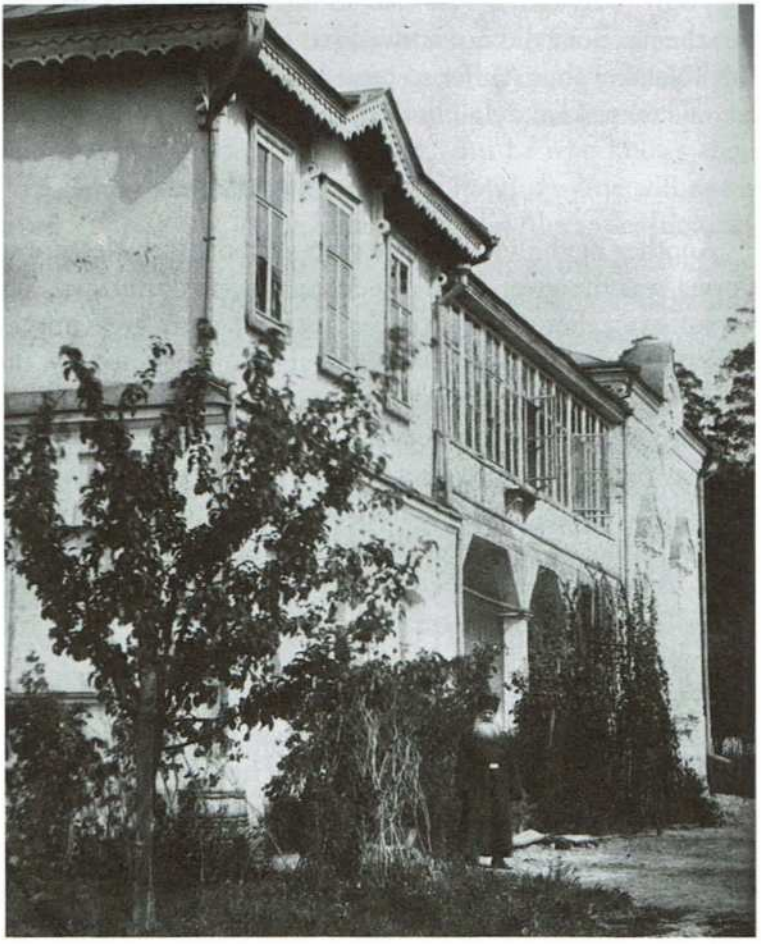
"That was the first call. But I did not follow it. The second was even more convincing, in 1939, from another Elder—Fr. Seraphim (Batyugov), who had tonsured Elder Nektary into the schema. But I did not answer that call either. The words of Elder Nektary about suffering came true.... It is clear to me that in some sense I am dying in fruitlessness."

3. ANNA AKHMATOVA

Another of the intellectuals who visited Elder Nektary in Optina was the great Russian poetess, Anna Akhmatova. She was suffering after the death of her husband, also a great poet of modern times, Gumilev. Her arrival was welcomed by the Elder, who had many visitors of that caliber.

"Batiushka, bless this poetess," they said to Elder Nektary, and they read him some verses on love, passion and tragedy. He said, 'She's worthy ... and honorable to come to Optina. There are two rooms for her here.' She came. She lived there for several days with Irisha Bobkova, the future Schema-nun Seraphima, in a cell in the infirmary building, which was built onto the church of St. Hilarion the Great.

What did the great Elder speak about with the famous poetess? This has remained a mystery. But was it not by his prayers that Akhmatova, during the course of her hellish soviet life, preserved her faith and sanity, and did not betray Russia, her creative work, or her friends? Was it not the protection of Optina that saved her from the camps and prisons, the blockade and death by starvation? She never spoke about this with anyone; but her sole "requiem" line, "And I'll never be in Optina again," rings with a kind of otherworldly pain.



Optina Church of St. Hilarion the Great, to which the monastery infirmary was attached.

4. THECLA TKACHEVA

Fyonechka—Schema-nun Thomaida—has died.*

Once, in Optina Monastery, where I lived from 1922 to 1923, Irisha and Nastya, who shared the apartment with me, told me that several girls had come on a pilgrimage from their home town of Gomel, and asked if they could spend the night with us. I gave my permission.

These were simple girls from the outskirts of the city and from the neighboring villages, but among them I noticed one who was, by her appearance, more intelligent, with a sweet face and thoughtful eyes. She was about twenty-five to twenty-seven years of age. I invited her to my room and said, "It seems to me that you differ somewhat from your companions." She smiled: "Yes, I'm a third year student of the Mathematics Faculty of Kharkov University, and also of the Department of Astronomy."

She had come to Optina at the direction of a priest in Gomel, to take counsel with Elder Nektary, and I invited her to stay with me. She agreed. We both did this without asking the Elder, without his blessing.

Fyonechka**—this was the girl's name—was taciturn and restrained, and said only that she had a large family: there were six younger sisters; her father had died, and her mother was now old. Fyonya was the eldest and the only one of the sisters who had attained a higher education, and she dreamt of becoming learned. She loved her astronomy and mathematics, but was also interested in literature and history, and even ancient languages, and was studying Latin. Laughing, she recited by heart an ode by Horatio.

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* This is an account of the life of schema-nun Thomaida, written by her friend. Taken from "Material on Hieroschema-monk Nektary" (manuscript), pp. 167-71.

** Fyonechka and Fyonya are diminutives for Thecla.—TRANS.

The next day she went to see the Elder and returned somewhat confused, but joyful. Fr. Nektary had told her to remain in Optina but had directed her companions to go home after a few days. I liked Fyonechka so much, that I proposed that she stay with me. We soon became friends. And then she related to me the extraordinary thing that had intruded into her life against her will and led her to Optina.

She was from an amazing family that had unusual visionary abilities. Her great uncle had been a rural conjurer. Her mother, a simple woman who knew only her home and housekeeping, and who did not stand out in the world in any way, foresaw (in concrete, vivid images) the revolution and the shooting of the Emperor and his family. She often foresaw events that intimately touched her relatives. The same characteristics began to manifest in Fyonya at about seventeen to eighteen years of age, unexpectedly and unpleasantly for her. The unseen world began as it were to move quite close to her, and began to overshadow the visible world. First and foremost, she began to see demons, who took on various forms—of people, animals, fish; and various human passions—their light and color. The envisioning of future events in pictures had not yet become developed—they manifested disjointedly—but they did speak of the state of her soul and that of people with whom she had contact. When we were living together, from time to time she would become absorbed in the contemplation of the world that was being revealed to her and would speak about what she was seeing. This was always unexpected both for me and for her, and was not connected with outward circumstances, nor was it accompanied by her sinking into a trance. Sometimes this would interrupt our peaceful conversation at the tea table, and she would say, "A demon has appeared in the room."

"What kind? Where?"

She would describe it: "It's standing behind you and coming closer ... how hideous!"

At first I was frightened and bewildered. I saw that she was not pretending and supposed that she had a mental illness. But if I were really to believe in the authenticity of the manifestations of these demons that Fyonya saw walking or floating into our room, then how should I react towards them? Sometimes terror gripped me. Then I went to the Elder and told him.

He looked at me: "And is Fyonya really living with you?"

"Yes."

"And who blessed the two of you?"

I became flustered. "No one. Fyonechka had nowhere to settle, and I let her live with me."

"But you're under obedience. How could you act in such a self-willed way? Remember that in Optina nothing is done without a blessing. And tell that to Fyonya. Everything that has happened with the two of you has been permitted for your chastisement and edification." I was embarrassed and begged forgiveness.

He smiled: "But neither of you should be afraid. Guard yourselves with the sign of the Cross and pay no attention to it."

I asked, "But why is it that Fyonechka sees the unseen?"

"It's hereditary in her family. Formerly, among the inhabitants of Kiev and Gomel, such an ability existed in many families, and still remains in certain families. It's not evoked, either by spiritual podvigs or by falls; it's not an obsession, but just an innate attribute of the soul." And he blessed us to live together. He commanded Fyonechka not to abandon me, even unto death, especially in any kind of trouble.

When these clairvoyant visions were first revealed to Fyonechka she suffered greatly, and was at first afraid. Her university studies, her aspirations for science—all her surrounding life contradicted this double sight. She did not know how to

control it and almost instinctively defended herself with prayer from the frightening world that had been opened up to her. But once, during one such artless, despairing, almost childlike prayer, a wondrous light shone upon her; and in this light, not only did her fears vanish, but something even replaced them in her consciousness. There was a change in her entire perception of the world and her desires. Even her beloved science seemed meaningless and vain before this all-radiant, all-consuming light, and Fyonya sensed the inner impossibility of returning to the university, to her student life. She still did not know her path, but she could no longer live in her former way.

She remained at home. But the wondrous light did not manifest again; her prayerful impulses themselves, as well as the revelations of the nether regions of the spiritual world, which continued apart from her will, were chaotic. She vaguely sensed the spiritual danger of her position, and conveyed this to her confessor, a priest of Gomel. But he did not have sufficient spiritual experience, although he himself had visited Optina, and he comprehended the seriousness of Fyonya's state of soul. It was he who advised her to turn to Elder Nektary. And so she joined the simple Gomel pilgrims whom she knew, put on a peasant kerchief, and dressed as they did; but the expression on her face, her intelligentsia manners and her speech gave her away. The Elder had her remain in Optina, and we began to live together.

Fyonya zealously began to aspire to monastic struggles and asceticism, but Fr. Nektary unfailingly put her back on the earth and did not allow her any kind of exaltations, although at the same time he taught her the Jesus Prayer—that mighty weapon against the dark powers. At that time there lived in Optina the family of the artist Leo Bruni; both he and his wife Nina were spiritual children of the Elder. They already had two small children. They had moved here from Petrograd in 1921,

Leo Bruni's Sketch of Elder Nektary, made from the back, since the Elder made a special point of not wanting his portrait done.

and were saved from starvation. Fr. Nektary gave Fyonya the obedience of helping Nina with the raising of the children and with the housekeeping. For many years Fyonya was bound up with that family, in which almost every year a child was born. When the parents moved to Moscow and took the eldest children with them, they left the youngest in Fyonya's care, near Optina, which by that time was already closed.

They lived on the former monastery fish farm, which Bruni had leased from the forest district, in a beautiful, picturesque location in the forest. They had a cow, a horse and dogs there. The children's grandmother also usually lived there, and some

of their friends would come, but the raising of the small children lay upon Fyonya. She was busy all day, and only the late evening remained to her for reading and self-reflection. But she learned to accompany all her labors and cares with interior prayer. At that time the Elder was exiled from Optina and lived in Kholmishche in the Briansk region, and Fyonya had the consolation several times a year of visiting him there and receiving direction. But her tonsure was still far off and the Elder did not insulate Fyonya from worldly life, from the reading of secular literature, or from society. Fyonya's inner life was hidden. Only her closest friends knew of it.

She had profound faith in the Elder, and doubt never shook that faith. She related how once, when saying goodbye to her, Fr. Nektary had made many small signs of the Cross over her face and chest. This was in winter. The next day at home she began to remove some heavy, ice-covered linens from the line. A gust of wind snapped the line and the linens, which were frozen with sharp, icy corners, fell on her face and chest, but she did not have even the slightest puncture wounds. The Elder also foretold the approximate year of her death.

After the Elder's death she remained yet a little longer in Bruni's family, but the children had grown and were already studying in Moscow. She returned to Gomel, to her native home, and only there was she tonsured, with all her sisters. She was tonsured immediately into the schema, but she retained her former outward appearance. She had empathy towards human woes and simple needs to the end. She said to me, "If you have a child, I'll take care of it. Fr. Nektary commanded me never to abandon you."

She settled near Maloyaroslavets in the village of Borodikhino with the family of the local teacher, in a small room partitioned off from the kitchen. She earned her living by sewing. She occasionally travelled to Moscow to the Bruni family, and

brought them what she could from the country. It was wartime, and there was a famine.

No one, even of those closest to her, suspected that she was a schema-nun. But once the teacher's children were peeping through a crack in the door and saw Thekla Michailovna standing before the icons dressed as a nun, but with unusual white embroidery on her garb. They told their mother and grandmother. They understood by the pattern of the embroidery that this was the garb of a schema-nun, but they told no one during Thekla Michailovna's life.

This is how she died: She succeeded in obtaining peas for Bruni and was bringing them to Moscow. She was hungry too, and ate a handful of peas on the train. The bag was heavy, and with exceedingly great difficulty she carried it from the station and barely dragged it up to the fifth floor to Bruni. She began to feel pain in her intestines. By evening they had to call an ambulance, and they took her straightaway to the hospital for surgery. As they went down the stairs she groaned quietly. She died on the operating table; her heart did not hold out.

She lay in peaceful repose, a half-smile on her face. She died on the fortieth day after the death of her favorite charge, Bruni's middle son Lavrik, who had perished at the front.

Thus, in her very death she completed her obedience, once given her by Elder Nektary: *Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ* (Gal. 6:2). The whole of her life was spent in the bearing of the burdens of other people, in active and unselfish service, and for herself she found prayer. And this was her schema.

5. RECOLLECTIONS OF SCHEMA-NUN THOMAIDA*

My spiritual father, the priest P., advised me to turn to the Optina Elders to resolve certain of my questions. At his word I left for Optina, not even knowing in what the guidance of elders consisted. At first I was able to see Fr. Anatole and, a few days later, Fr. Nektary. He gave me Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov's book on mental prayer, written in a literary style and not in specifically monastic language. I was reading and thought, "How do they read such books here? Why, such a language would be terribly difficult and incomprehensible to them." The Elder replied to my thought with the subtlest smile, "Of course, we're semiliterate and can't read such books; after all, this is written for such educated young ladies as yourself." Here I couldn't restrain myself, and I threw the book down and fell before him on my knees.

I subsequently travelled to Optina two more times and went to see the Elders, but felt too self-conscious to ask them anything, and thus I received no direction from them. Later I asked about the other Elders, who were also silent: "Fr. Nektary, why don't any of you say anything?" And he said, "Because you don't even ask."

The second time, my spiritual father asked me to bring back, without fail, an answer to his letter. I timidly asked Fr. Nektary, but he said to me, "Wait around until tomorrow." However, the next day he apologized—his secretary had not come—and he again asked me to wait until the next day. He tortured me like that for two weeks. I would not have been bold enough to bother him on my own account, but for my

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* Taken from Metropolitan Benjamin (Fedchenkov), *God's People: My Spiritual Encounters*, pp. 179-185.

spiritual father I had to. With what torment and trepidation I kept asking the Elder to give me an answer once and for all. But he kept putting it off.

I finally decided to leave. Without taking a blessing from the Elder I went to the railroad station. The train was to come right then, but I felt such depression, such a desire to return to Optina and get an answer for my spiritual father no matter what, that I couldn't restrain myself and dashed back. Fr. Nektary met me with a smile and gave me the already-sealed letter.

When I came for the third time, the Elder kept me there to live in Optina. But as it turned out, I was travelling light and had come without my belongings. I had intended to stay a week, but I lived there for a year. It was then that he began to train me spiritually. He didn't answer my questions: "You and I have nowhere to rush to—we've got a year ahead of us." He led me by an austere path. He laid bare all my thoughts, down to the pettiest things. I remember, I once glanced in the mirror and thought, "How pale I've become." And when I came to see the Elder he began to mimic me in front of everyone—he looked at me the way I had looked at myself in the mirror and asked, "Why are you so pale?" I then ceased looking at myself in the mirror.

Winter arrived, and I had cotton shoes and no warm clothes. And my lungs were already in a poor state. I walked through snow—you might say, almost barefoot—and nothing happened; I didn't catch cold. Fr. Nektary asked me, "Fyonechka, aren't you cold?"

"No, Batiushka, by your holy prayers I'm all right."

And then he said, "Soon I'll give you a warm riassa."

"As you please."

The next day a nun came up to me in church and said, "A lady wants to give you a warm riassa—she can't bear to see you

walking around poorly dressed in such cold weather." I remembered the Elder's words and gave thanks....

It would happen that he would take me and press my head to his heart and doze off. I'd be afraid to stir, so as not to disturb him. My whole body would become numb. Then I would begin to gently kiss his hand to wake him, and he would awaken, laugh and dismiss me. There was no question of mine that he did not answer, so that I was both consoled and thrown into confusion at the same time.

Fr. Nektary left to go to Basil Petrovich at the farm. Nadezhda (Pavlovich) and I followed him, and later we moved to Kholmishche. Once (Nadezhda had already gone to Moscow for treatment), the Elder sent me to Basil Petrovich when it was already toward evening, but he kept detaining me under various pretexts and only towards the end did he say, "Well, go now." At parting he asked, "You're not afraid?" "No, by your holy prayers I'm not afraid." I arrived at the farm and everyone there was terrified. "How is it that you walked? It hasn't been a quarter of an hour since our dogs were howling at a wolf." And it was true—along the road I had seen huge, fresh tracks.

Here on the farm the Elder once told me to stoke his stove. I brought in the firewood and opened two dampers. Fr. Nektary himself, giving a blessing, lit the firewood and smoke began to pour out into the room. He asked me, "Did you open the dampers?"

"I opened them," I replied.

"Take another look."

"No, Batiushka, there's nothing to look at; I know I opened them."

The smoke kept pouring and pouring into the room. The Elder went out onto the porch. It was windy there. He stood there, turned up his collar, and the wind ruffled his gray hair. His cell-attendant Peter came and asked me, "Did you open all

three dampers?" I froze. "No," I said, "only two." Peter ran to open the third. I begged Fr. Nektary's forgiveness and tried to persuade him to come to my room (I lived in the same house, on the other side), but he would not agree. He just continued standing on the porch until the room was cleared of smoke, a living reproach to my disobedience.

The Elder warned me—"When you leave for Optina, don't visit your friends whom you usually visit." But I didn't listen, and due to my disobedience circumstances resulted that were favorable to sin, and I fell into a mortal sin. The Elder drove me away. I returned to my room and fell upon the floor in the utmost despair. I sensed that Fr. Nektary was standing by me invisibly and lifting me up. I came to myself and somehow survived this misfortune, but for two years after this he did not receive me. Then he received me and said, "You'll never commit a mortal sin again."

Once I felt hatred towards one of the Elder's close spiritual daughters. I was tormented by this temptation and admitted it to Fr. Nektary and he gave me to read the story of Joseph, whose brother's were envious of Joseph's many-colored garment; and I understood that the root of my hatred was envy. I instantly felt sincere compunction.

Once he led me up to the icons, stood me there, and said, "Say *O Theotokos and Virgin* until she replies 'Rejoice,'" and then he left. I said it with terror and thought, "How will this happen?" I didn't hear any kind of answer. Then Fr. Nektary came in and allowed me to kiss his pectoral cross, and I was enveloped by an inexplicable joy.

Once in Kholmishche the Elder brought out a saucer of water and a piece of cotton and, making the sign of the Cross over me, began to wash my face with the water. I became troubled and thought, "Isn't he preparing me for death?" The next day I was helping to take down some ice-covered linens from the attic.

I was standing below and they were handing them down from above. Suddenly someone dropped a huge, frozen-solid blanket and it hit me in the face. Such a blow could have seriously disabled me, but it turned out that there wasn't even a bruise or a scratch on my face. I went to Fr. Nektary and told him; he silently washed my face again the same way.

Once in Kholmishche I entered his side of the house and heard from the vestibule, through the closed door, that in the reception room the Elder was reproaching someone or demanding something in a very loud, threatening voice. I began to feel strange and terrified. This was not his usual manner and I thought, "Who is he giving it to like that?" When I said the prayer, he opened the door. There was no one in the room.

Elder Nektary often said, "When I'm sick, I grieve; but when I'm healthy I can't make use of my health."

Concerning children, he said, "If a child gets angry in its infancy, it's already sinning."

"To keep children from getting sick you have to commune them more often."

"In order to flee temptation, one must look straight ahead, and not look to either side."

I often used to make the sign of the Cross mentally. Fr. Nektary explained that I must not do this. "If you want to bless some person or object, then you can imagine them mentally, but the sign of the Cross is made by a physical movement."

"When the hour strikes, cross yourself, to guard the coming hour."

Once a woman wrote to him that she was in terrible need. He began to weep, "Just think, she doesn't even have bread."

"You must make the sign of the Cross upon all four sides of your room before you go to sleep."

He permitted me to take his blessing from afar. "When?" I asked. He said, "The Church prays morning, noon and evening."

Once he gave me a white embroidered blouse as a gift and told me to wear it. I asked, "Batiushka, is this a straitjacket?" And he laughed, "No, it's a grace-filled one."*

He exposed my hidden passions, of which I myself had no suspicions. I was usually generous and uncalculating. Suddenly he asked me, "Do you have any money?"

"Yes," I answered.

"How much?"

"Ten roubles."

"Lend it to me."

But all of a sudden I felt sorry about giving him the money. Horrified, I said to him, "Batiushka, forgive me; I didn't know I was like that!" And he laughed.

Once I was standing on the porch in Kholmishche. Maria came up to me and gave me a handkerchief from Fr. Nektary. A few days after this I wept bitterly over a quarrel with her, and he wouldn't see me. Later he did receive me and gave me something to read about an abbess who received a handkerchief from her spiritual father and it foretold tears.

Maria had a cup that the Elder had given her on the day of her tonsure and he repeatedly told her, "Put it away so it doesn't get broken." Once I was washing the dishes and accidentally broke the saucer belonging to that cup. I went to Fr. Nektary and quietly asked forgiveness. He replied, "God forgives." When Maria found out that the saucer had been broken she went into hysterics. The Elder comforted her and scolded me in front of everyone: "What maliciousness! Fyonya broke it on purpose to vex poor Maria." I whispered to him and got down

* In Russian, the word for "strait" in "straitjacket" comes from a verb that means "to humble."—TRANS.

on my knees. He said, "You can't feed everyone milk; you also need solid food." He silently squeezed my hand, but then continued to scold me loudly. For an entire week after this he did not receive me. I struggled. Finally I brought the samovar in to him, set it on the stool, and was glad that I could see him privately. He blessed me and I, grasping his hand and holding it, said, "Batiushka, why haven't you let me see you? Now I'm not going to let you go until you see me." Then he made an indescribable, squeamish motion, brushing me away as if I were a toad. I couldn't contain myself and began to cry. Then he softened in an instant, received me and laughed: "There—your eyes are washed. That was all I needed."

* * *

The following was written by Nadezhda Alexandrovna Pavlovich, who also knew Schema-nun Thomaida when she first came to Optina:

A certain Thomaida came to see Fr. Nektary and remained. She was clairvoyant from her youth; it was hereditary, from her family. She saw demons absolutely plainly, at any time of the day or night and under any circumstances. We would often be sitting with her and she would say, "Nadya, there's a demon."

I, in terror: "Where?"

"Right there," she would point.

I, in a panic, but with curiosity: "What does it look like?"

The appearance of the demons were varied—in the form of fish, of cats, of a red, drunken face, etc. I went to the Elder and told him. And he replied, "Don't be afraid." And I ceased being afraid, and from that time regarded Thomaida's visions calmly.

It fell to my lot to see the impure powers only once at that time. I was sitting in the "hut," where the icon "It Is Truly Meet" was, on the steps leading to the Elder's room, with my back to his door. The "hut" was full. I had no expectation of anything supernatural, and it wasn't late—only about six in the

evening. Suddenly I saw a bluish-gold snake running out from behind my right shoulder—kind of like slow lightning—it slipped away, hid, and came running out again. I was amazed and began to rub my eyes, thinking that this was some sort of strange physical phenomenon. No, it didn't help. And I was ashamed to cross myself—well, why should I, just like that, facing the people, cross myself? The serpent was more quickly and, as it were, more impudently slithering at my side.

"If only Fr. Nektary would come out!" I thought. No, he's not coming. And I was already beginning to be gripped by an unpleasant feeling. Then I crossed myself on the sly, again feeling self-conscious. It was even worse! In front of me, on a level with my face, was a little star, burning with the same bluish-gold flame, and it began to dance around at a brisk pace. Its movements were animated, lively and festive. Then I could not contain myself and crossed myself with a large, open sign of the Cross. Everything vanished in an instant.

A minute later the door opened and out came the Elder; he blessed everyone and called me in to his cell. I told him about the vision and asked him: "What was that—something physical or a spiritual manifestation?" He, smiling, said, "No, it was spiritual." And he added that it was my punishment for something, only I no longer remember what it was.

Bishop Stephen (formerly Dr. Sergius Alexeyevich Nikitin)
with Priest George and Nun Augusta (Katya).

15

A Trip to Kholmishche

ARCHIMANDRITE BORIS KHOLCHEV*

Archimandrite Boris (Kholchev) was born in 1895 and reposed on November 11, 1971. He was a parishioner of Fr. Sergius Mechev in Moscow. After visiting Optina, he became a spiritual son of Elder Nektary, by whose blessing he was ordained to the diaconate in 1927. He was ordained to the priesthood a year later. Prior to his service in the Church he had been a gifted psychologist and teacher. He was arrested in 1931 and, after his term, at Fr. Sergius Mechev's advice, he moved to Rybinsk, where he lived as a recluse from 1938 until 1948, when he began to serve openly again. He performed the funeral for Fr. Sergius after the latter's martyric death. He was tonsured in 1955 and shortly thereafter was raised to the rank of archimandrite in the city of Tashkent, where he reposed.

Bishop Stephen (Nikitin) was born in 1895 and reposed on April 15, 1963. He was a spiritual son of Fr. Alexis Mechev and, after the latter's repose, of his son, Fr. Sergius. He worked as a physician (thanks to the counsel of Elder Nektary) and thus, after his arrest in 1931, he worked as a doctor in the camps, where he did much good. He was ordained to the priesthood only after World War II, and then served in a number of cities until he was consecrated Bishop of Mozhaisk. Several months before his death

* Taken from *Little Flowers of Optina Monastery*, pp. 149-53.

he was made temporary Bishop of Kaluga. There he reposed before the Royal Doors of the Kaluga Cathedral, while giving a sermon on the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearing Women.

In the 1920's a young physician, Sergius Alexeyevich Nikitin (later Bishop Stephen), was living in Moscow. We were on friendly terms, and because of this he could come to me for help in his serious personal matters.

This is what happened. As an undoubtedly gifted man, he was offered work in scientific research. But his heart was also drawn to the practical work of a regular physician. He was forced to make a choice between these two aspects of medical service. He decided not to do this on his own, and since he was a deeply believing man, the thought occurred to him to turn for advice to the last Optina Elder, Fr. Nektary. Sergius Alexeyevich had heard much about him previously and was greatly interested in him, but had not yet had the chance to see him. At that time it was not so easy to reach Fr. Nektary in the village of Kholmishche.... I usually had to take the train to Sukhinichi, then somehow go the six miles to Kozelsk, and then Fr. Nikon would find me a horse to get me to Kholmishche.

Sergius Alexeyevich knew about this and came to ask me to make the connections for him. Some time passed before an affirmative reply arrived to the letter of inquiry I had sent to Fr. Nikon. He took it upon himself to help Sergius Alexeyevich reach Elder Nektary. And the trip took place—as it happened, he had several days off in a row.

One day, sometime later, the door of my room opened with a noise and a joyfully excited Sergius Alexeyevich burst in. He was aglow, as if he had just received Holy Communion. "Greetings, Sergius Alexeyevich. Did you make it?"

"Yes, I'll tell you about it right now." I listened, and he related the following:

Archimandrite Boris (Kholchev), author
of these recollections, at the time
he knew St. Nektary.

Fr. Nikon (Belyaev) brought him to Kholmishche at twilight, "having come to the setting of the sun." In the solid peasant house of Andrei Efimovich, Evening Prayers were being read in Fr. Nektary's half of the house. Several people were quietly listening to the reading in the room. Sergius Alexeyevich and Fr. Nikon silently joined them. There was a special prayerful coziness, with the lampada flickering before the icons and the droning of the reverential human voice, evenly uttering line after line from the work of the great authors of prayer—Macarius, Antiochus, Chrysostom and Damascene. The reading ended. The dismissal was approaching. Suddenly, from behind a light partition, the gray stooped-over Elder appeared, walking in an odd way. "He's barely moving his feet along," thought Sergius Alexeyevich. And then some kind of new, strange thoughts came over him: "To whom have you come? Why, this old geezer must surely be senile; and you—a young, capable doctor—are coming to him for advice? What a laugh!"

An unfamiliar feeling of disgusted vexation, of offended self-love, darkened the inner peace of Sergius Alexeyevich. Someone unseen but evil insistently provoked in him a feeling of animosity towards the external appearance, movements and intellectual and spiritual faculties of this "stooped-over old geezer." He wanted to leave.

Meanwhile Fr. Nektary gave the dismissal, and those present began to approach him one at a time for a blessing. Sergius Alexeyevich did the same, with all the outward respect due to the priestly rank of the Elder. Fr. Nektary blessed everyone, but said that he felt poorly and asked those that had come to avail themselves of the hospitality of Andrei Efimovich in his half of the house. Then Fr. Nikon put in a word for Sergius Alexeyevich saying that the Moscow doctor had to leave early in the morning so as to get to work on time. The Elder agreed to have

a word with Sergius Alexeyevich right then and kept him in the room. All the others went out.

Fr. Nektary reached the armchair by the table with difficulty, offered his guest a seat, sat in the armchair, straightened himself a bit, and asked Sergius Alexeyevich, "You haven't by any chance studied the sacred history of the Old Testament, have you?" "What do you mean? I've studied it," replied the young doctor.

"Just imagine,"—here Fr. Nektary switched from question to narrative—"Why, absolutely groundlessly, it's now believed that the era that mankind lived through before the Flood was desolate, wild and ignorant. But in actual fact, that culture was exceedingly advanced. People knew how to do a great deal, were ingenious in the extreme in their concepts and magnificent in appearance. Only they expended all their powers of body and soul on their property—on that which was made by their own hands. All the abilities of their primeval nature they focused in one direction only—to satisfying their bodily needs in every way possible. Their trouble was that they 'had become flesh.' So the Lord decided to correct their one-sidedness. Through Noah He announced the Flood, and for a hundred years Noah called people to reform and preached repentance before the face of God's anger. And as proof of the rightness of his words he built the ark.

"And what do you think? To the people of that time, grown accustomed to the elegant form of their civilization, it was quite strange to see how a senile old geezer was, in an age of magnificent culture, knocking together some kind of ridiculous box of enormous proportions and, on top of that, was preaching in God's name about an approaching flood. What a laugh!"

Sergius Alexeyevich was at first bewildered that Fr. Nektary had begun to speak about antediluvian culture. But suddenly he recognized his own expressions in the Elder's words: "senile

old geezer...." And this "old geezer," it appears, had read his thoughts. The young doctor was seized by intense embarrassment. His face immediately flushed; everything he had wanted to ask the Elder evaporated. Fr. Nektary cut short his embarrassment with a surprisingly ordinary phrase: "Most likely, you're tired from your trip, and here I am talking to you about the flood." His handsome face, framed by gray hair as by a halo, shone in a childlike way with a pure smile. His eyes radiated goodness and wisdom. He offered Sergius Alexeyevich the couch to lie down on while he began to prepare a letter to be sent off in the morning.

When in the morning Sergius Alexeyevich approached him for a blessing to take his leave, Fr. Nektary blessed him and kept repeating, "Practicing physician, practicing physician." Thus was the answer given to his unposed question. It was even more than an answer. For a long time afterwards Sergius Alexeyevich worked as a physician under every circumstance, both in freedom and in imprisonment. And then, when he became a priest, as well as later, when he became a bishop, he made broad use of his colossal medical knowledge in the work of the pastoral care of souls.

The confusion that had been pressing upon him vanished without a trace. A bright, joyful tranquility filled his soul, which had been invigorated by contact with the Elder, with the holy doer of the Jesus Prayer.

Sergius Alexeyevich brought his impression from his short visit to the country house in Kholmishche back to Moscow in all its freshness. He conveyed his experience to me. The room was filled with the incense of dear recollections—the inspired faces, the gates of the Skete, the "hut," radiant Optina with the murmur of its age-old pines, the last Optina Elder in Kholmishche. How bright, how dear....

Fr. Melchisedek of Optina serving a Pannikhida at the grave site of Elder Nektary, which has been preserved and cared for since the time of the translation of his relics to Optina.

Actor Michael Chekhov in the role of Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* at the time he met St. Nektary.

16

Movie Actor

MICHAEL CHEKHOV*

The true concept of the art of theater, as it was in ancient traditions, is that theater is to be a vehicle through which a genuine experience of life is presented to the viewer as truth. Russian theatrical traditions strove to portray life in its most real form, and to depict reality as true to life as possible. True art is real. Therefore true actors in Russia took very seriously the art of presenting life. When communism forced the theater to serve as socialist propaganda, however, these truth-seeking actors turned away from theater and turned to the Church.

Michael Chekhov, a relative of the famous playwright Anton Chekhov, was an actor in Imperial Russia. He visited Elder Nektary along with other actors, and they were all struck by his profound knowledge of Shakespearean plays and theater in general. These artists soon became familiar with the Confessions *of Blessed Augustine, a vehicle of sincerity which greatly touched and influenced them. The Elder baffled Michael with his deep understanding of drama, and a friendship ensued. It was Michael Chekhov's family that sent the coffin for Elder Nektary. Michael later emigrated to America and went to Hollywood, where he became a*

* Taken from *Optina Monastery and its Era*, pp. 541-44.

popular character actor. In the 1940s he shared his memoirs, whence the following portion is extracted.

DESPITE THE FACT that he had been placed under surveillance, the Elder's disciples, who had known him back in Optina, visited him right up to his death, and not a single unfortunate incident occurred in connection with the people that came to see him. The road to his place lay through a dense forest. It was fifteen miles from the small railway station to the first village. Peasants would bring the visitor to this village, and there they would keep him in one of the peasant huts until it was dark. They travelled the remaining few miles when it was already towards night.

I, too, got to see the Elder, and this is how it came about:

The Russian poetess N. (Nadezhda Pavlovich), who was in contact with him, once told me that during her previous visit the Elder had seen a portrait she had of me in the role of Hamlet. Examining the portrait, he said, "I see a spark in him. Bring him to me."

It was then, thanks to N., that I first learned of the existence of Elder Nektary and, having prepared myself, I went to see him.

The train pulled up at night to the small, dark station, where a wide peasant sled was already waiting, barely covered with straw and harnessed to a poor, emaciated old horse. There was a bitter frost. The road was long and hard. After five hours of travel it was already dawn, and in the first village they led me to a cabin and told me to lie down on the stove-bed until dark. I arrived at the Elder's cabin only towards night, and was received by him on the following morning.

He lived in a small room, behind a partition. It was not without some nervousness that I entered the room, awaiting his appearance. The monk came out towards me, in black raiment.

He was short of stature and bent over at the waist. I was unable to examine his face immediately—the Elder's whole figure was quite stooped over towards the ground.

"Greetings, Michael Alexandrovich," he said, bowing to me.

I was struck by his addressing me formally, by my patronymic.

He sat down and I saw his bright, joyful blue eyes, his sparse gray beard, and his regularly shaped nose. It was obvious that Fr. Nektary had been handsome in his younger days. Before I could succeed in figuring out how I should conduct myself, he smiled merrily and said, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."* Then, after a pause, he added, "Yes, I too have a leaning toward science. I keep abreast of it. But do you know, Michael Alexandrovich, when the first tragedy was performed?" he asked me, glancing craftily at me.

I had to admit that I didn't know.

"When our first ancestors, Adam and Eve, appeared on the scene!"

He laughed cheerfully and continued: "When I was still a little boy, a very skillful magician visited our village. He walked a tightrope and tossed his cap up and caught it."

Thus the Elder entertained me with his talk on theater. He quickly removed from me that unnecessary tinge of "mysticism" concerning him that I had brought with me. He arose and, barely moving his ailing feet, went behind the partition. He brought out a box of candy and placed one of the candies in my mouth. He handed out to his visitors everything they brought him, or he treated those who were newly arrived. Then he immediately changed his tone and began a serious talk with me. The conversation was of a personal character. When he had

* *Hamlet,* Act I, scene 5.

finished the Elder blessed me and dismissed me, saying that he would summon me again in the evening. After me, one after another, a few more visitors went in to see him. When it had gotten dark he again sent for me.

"Don't worry about your wife," he said suddenly, "she's well and everything's all right at home."

I actually had begun to get quite nervous about what was going on at home, in Moscow. It seemed to me that the detectives that followed me always and everywhere could not but know about my trip to the Elder, and could appear in my apartment in my absence. I had already seen his clairvoyance in the morning and knew that he was speaking the truth.

I succeeded in visiting Elder Nektary several times. He was always cheerful; he laughed, joked, and made whoever came to see him and who spent even a few minutes with him happy. He took upon himself the sins, burdens, and sufferings of others in a real way—everyone who had contact with him sensed this, as I also sensed it. When he was asked about this ability of his to grant relief to those who came to him, he said in reply, "When many burdens pile up on my back, the grace of God comes and scatters them like dry leaves, and then it's easy again."

After the Elder's death I saw him in dreams two or three times, and each time he gave me advice which led me out of spiritual difficulties from which I was unable to extricate myself by my own power.

Once when I was spending the night in the Elder's cabin I was situated fairly close to the partition behind which he himself slept. And I heard how he wept bitterly at night. In the morning he was happy and joyful as always.

"Our path," he once said concerning eldership, "is like that of tightrope-walkers: if you get where you're going—fine; but if you fall halfway there—they'll laugh at you!"

When I was leaving for the last time, I was awaiting the Elder's permission and blessing for my departure. The harnessed sled already stood outside. Little time remained before the train's departure and I, I confess, began to get nervous, fearing to be late. Fifteen miles, night, frost, and the worn-out village horse—she'd get me there soon! But the Elder dragged. I asked the landlord to remind him about my departure, but the peasant looked reproachfully at me, a man of little faith and a doubter. Right then the Elder sat down at the table and seemed to be examining the alarm clock in front of him. I realized that it was already impossible to catch the train and thought with displeasure about the consequences that my being late might evoke in Moscow. Time had completely run out. Suddenly the Elder glanced at me and, as if answering my uneasy thoughts, clearly and firmly said, "I give you an angel to accompany you. Don't worry about anything."

I don't know whether time stretched out or the road got shorter, but to my great surprise (and shame!) I was not late for the train.

I never saw the Elder again. He died not long before my departure abroad. My wife still managed to send a coffin for his body and a little money for the burial.

Renewed Optina today. The graves of the Elders can be seen to the right of the church, behind the altar.

17

The Power of Love

ELLA PETROVNA*

The power of love transcends human barriers and earthly logic and misunderstanding. Here is an incidental account from a non-Orthodox person whose heart was touched by the love and care of an Elder who did not force people to live up to any expectations, but who instead bestowed love abundantly. These humble notes of a grateful heart shed yet another ray of light upon the pastoral care that this old, sick and overburdened Elder conferred. These few gentle strokes of a pen have arrested for posterity moments of saintly kindness, witnessing to the power of love.

I REMEMBER Fr. Nektary every day. When my children are unhappy I say to him, "You've taken them, you guide them."

The first time I went to him was with my eldest daughter. For half of the trip we quarrelled. A new young man had appeared in our village. I knew nothing about him. I knew only that he was a lawyer, educated and, well, interesting—but what kind of man he was, I didn't know. But my daughter had begun to fall in love with him.

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* Taken from "Material on Hieroschema-monk Nektary" (manuscript), pp. 126-27.

I used to be of one soul with her, but now she was drawn to this strange man, and told me that she wanted to get married. But I was jealous and afraid to give her up. Only near Kholmishche did we make peace.

We went in to see the Elder. He received us immediately, and was so kind. He seated us and asked, "Is there perhaps a misunderstanding between you two?" But we said, "No."

Then he began to say that my girl had a blessing to get married right away (they had wanted to wait a year, correspond, and test themselves); but he said that it should be right away, and that I should take them into my home. I had imagined that she would go off with her groom right before my eyes, that they would start coming to dinner late—after all, it would be all the same to him to have dinner two hours late—and my heart was very upset. But Fr. Nektary kept talking and I became obedient, meek and gracious.

"You make her a new gown and marry her off—in church, marry her off." And he repeated about the gown several times, but I kept looking at my girl, and her face was glowing, you understand—really glowing.

I said that we had no means, but Fr. Nektary said that kind people would help out. And in truth, kind people did help out. We had everything—there were all kinds of cookies for tea. Only dinner turned out to be modest. They were married in Moscow, in church, and I felt the same kind of grace as from the Elder.

Then the Elder began to speak to us like an old gentleman, about paintings and science—so graciously—and gave us a box of marmalade as a gift. A year after the wedding my girl was expecting a child and was anxious and asked the Elder how she should conduct herself. He wrote to her about everything: to walk softly, not rush around, not lift anything heavy, and that all would be well. And it was true—the birth was outstanding.

Then my younger girl went to see him. He told her that she should prepare herself immediately to be trained as a teacher, that she would be married in her twentieth year, and that the groom would appear then. Now she's going to be twenty.

Fr. Nektary asked me, "Have you become Orthodox yet?" "No Batiushka, and don't force me." He understood that I'm an old woman, and it's hard for me to change my religion. But I know that he had the kind of grace that does not exist in our church—and such love. I would come to him, bend my old head over to his knees and give him all my burdens....

And he would weep.

Shamordino Convent today. The renewed St. Ambrose Convent is again becoming a carrier of the Optina spirit.

18

The Virtue of Patience

NUN ANNA POLOTSKAYA*

Two nuns of Shamordino, close friends of Leo Bruni, Anna and Irene survived the shameful banishment of the Optina monastics. When she was already in her old age, Nun Anna recalled how, in her youth, she was an ardent disciple of the last great Elder. Nina Bruni, the artist's daughter, could not remember whether Anna's last name was Polotskaya, or whether she was so named because she came from Polotsk, a town of spiritual significance.

WHEN I WENT TO SEE Elder Nektary for the first time, he received me right away. I was very happy. Tatiana had told me before this how hard it was to get to see him, and she tried to persuade me to be obedient to him in everything. Had it not been for her words, I would not have been able to endure the trials I then went through with him.

The Elder received me and ordered me to say the prayer *O Theotokos and Virgin, rejoice...* using a prayer rope and to make prostrations, while he went into his cell. I went through the prayer rope three times. Then he came in and sat down

* Taken from Metropolitan Benjamin (Fedchenkov), *God's People: My Spiritual Encounters,* pp. 189-91 and "Material on Hieroschema-monk Nektary" (manuscript), pp. 120-21.

on a chair. I wanted to kneel before him, but he wouldn't let me.

"Sit right here beside me, Matushka," and he moved a chair over for me.

He began to ask me my name, whether I had been in the convent long, what talents I had, what sort of temptations I had been through, and what my worst sins were. I wept and told him.

Then he left and again told me to pray to the Mother of God, and said further, "Live with Tanya. This blessing is not from me, a sinner, but is what the Lord Himself and the Mother of God wish."

I had had a disagreement with Tanya before this, but I immediately humbled down. Fr. Nektary returned and brought out an Akathist to the Reigning Icon of the Mother of God. "Here—read it and I'll pray with you, otherwise I'll have no time because of all this bustling."

I said, "Batiushka, I read poorly." But he said, "Never mind, never mind—the Lord will help you."

And indeed, I began to read well enough—it was printed in large, Russian [not Slavonic] type. Then he left again and brought me another Akathist, this one in manuscript—to the Lord Jesus. I don't remember what it was called, only that it was to be read when one was in sorrows. Then I understood that my life would be sorrowful. The Elder told me to kneel and read it. He placed me on my knees himself and left.

I read it, but he didn't come back. An hour went by, then another. Fr. Nektary came in, but didn't pay any attention to me; I was still on my knees, where he put me. He began to receive other visitors, while I kept kneeling there. My feet were getting numb, and I felt such weakness. I was about to fall over; my head was getting cloudy, the lines on the page were merging. I could no longer read or pray; I re-examined all the Elder's

icons and prayed before all of them, and kept kneeling there, while he paid me no attention whatsoever.

When he had placed me there it was not yet noon, and now they were ringing the bells for Vespers—it was half past four. Then he walked over to me and raised me up—I couldn't get up myself—and he bowed low to me: "I thank you for your obedience." Then he said to Fr. Sebastian, "Take her by the hand to your cell and hurry up and feed her. Give her my soup," and he himself brought me a bowl of soup.

The next day I came to see him, but he didn't receive me—"Go to Fr. Anatole." No matter how I begged, he stood his ground: "Go to Fr. Anatole." He tormented me like that for four days. Only Fr. Anatole (I went to him for a blessing) fortified me: "Let him chase you away, but don't you leave. He's sure to receive you."

I lost all my strength and lay in the "hut" on the couch and wept. At that point Tatiana from Smolensk was with the Elder. She emerged from his room and loudly, across the whole "hut" said, "Where is Mother Anna Polotskaya?"

I answered her.

"Well then, Matushka, the Elder told me to take you in, feed you and calm you down. He said, 'Mother Anna's dying; make up a bed for her and wash her.'"

I went with Tanya and told her about my woe, and she comforted me: "Batiushka will receive you tomorrow without fail." But I didn't believe it anymore. In the morning I was so sick that I didn't go to the "hut," and Fr. Nektary met Tatiana: "Where's Mother Anna? Didn't you bring her with you?"

She explained that I was sick, but he ordered me to come in the evening without fail.

I came. He received everyone, but not me. At last he received me—the very last one—and he consoled me so, and showed me such kindness. He said, "I liked you right away.

You're a clever girl, but I'm feeble-minded. I just don't know how we're going to get along, unless you accept my feeble-mindedness as wisdom. I liked you right away." And then he appointed a time for me to come to him for Confession.

Another time I came together with Tanya. He received Tanya, was affectionate towards her, called her all sorts of nice names, but paid no attention to me. I felt distressed, and thoughts came to me: "If only I knew whether or not he considered me his spiritual daughter. If he does, then I can endure anything; but if not, then I've come for no reason." And these thoughts had barely passed through my mind when Fr. Nektary called me over, embraced me, and said, "You're my dear child, you're my closest child. You know, I consider you one of my very closest, and don't you ever forget that. Always remember what I'm telling you right now." And he consoled me so much that I've remembered it for my whole life....

And the next day he again stopped receiving me.

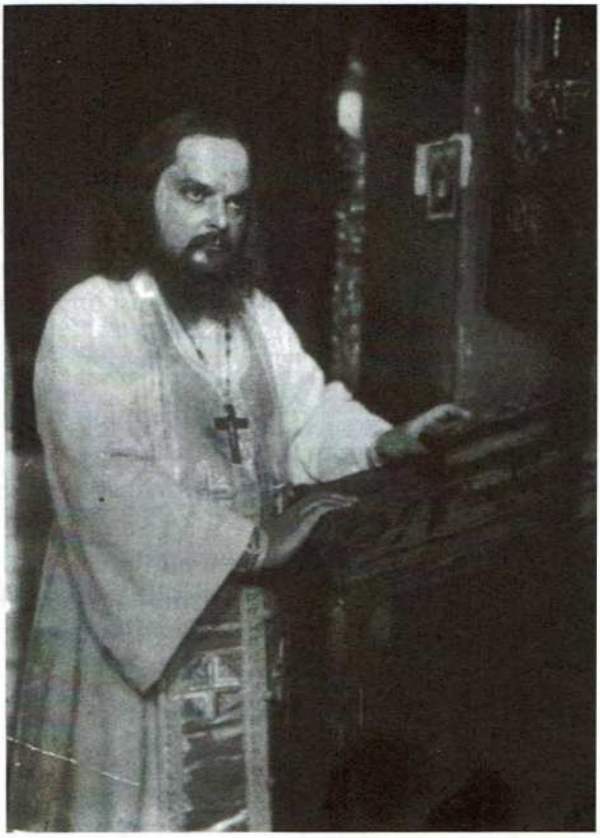
I was Fr. Nektary's spiritual daughter for thirteen years. He foretold the future to me many times. My sister came to see him—he told her that it would be good for her if she entered a monastery: "Think it over well and then tell me." But to me he said that if she did not enter a monastery, many sorrows awaited her. My sister thought and thought, and decided not to enter a monastery. Fr. Nektary even began to weep when I told him this. And what happened? That same year she fell ill with diabetes. She began to eat so much that I didn't have enough money to feed her. I made an appointment for her at the Soldatenkov Hospital in Moscow and travelled to Moscow myself. I spent my earned money and bought food for her and brought it to the hospital. Later I became exhausted. I came for a rest to the Elder for two months. I didn't get to see my sister again—the Elder wouldn't let me. Whatever he advised me to do turned out well.

I thought that things would go badly for my sister, that she would perish without me; but it turned out that people were found that helped her and, in accordance with the Elder's orders, did everything that was necessary for her. Before she died they comforted her spiritually, and gave her a very nice funeral when she died.

When Fr. Nektary was arrested they put him in the building to the left of the gates, on the ground floor, where the bread bakery was. It was damp and cold there, and he became very ill, but no matter how we begged him to ask for a doctor, he didn't ask for one, although he acted as though he agreed to our request. Finally, we ourselves arranged for the doctor to get in to see him. The doctor said that the sick man must immediately be placed in the hospital. They carried him out in their arms and drove him to the police in the city. There he sat through the whole night in a smoke-filled room, in the midst of a terrible din. Then they brought him to the hospital. Here again he had to wait a whole hour in the cold until the manager came. They gave him a bed and posted a sentry. We won over the guards with various handouts and coaxed them into letting us through to the Elder, and we visited him regularly and brought him everything he needed. When he was freed he went to Basil Petrovich on the farm, and from there, without saying anything, to Andrei Efimovich in Kholmishche.

* * *

With these words ends this simple narrative, which sheds light on hitherto unknown details of the suffering and the passion of the Elder's separation from his beloved monastery. This took place on Great Thursday, when the whole of Christendom follows the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, reading the Twelve Passion Gospels, that relate our Lord's voluntary sufferings and death.



Fr. Sergius Mechev giving a sermon in the
St. Nicholas Church on Maroseiko St. in Moscow.

19

Parting with the Elder

SOPHIA A. ENGELHARDT*

The Optina Elders used to extend the influence of their eldership to devoted lay priests who, being spiritual directors in the world, were then able to prepare souls to understand spiritual leadership through the monastic elders. Thus, for example, Elder Ambrose and Elder Anatole II blessed some outstanding righteous priests to take upon themselves the delicate task of guiding totally dedicated souls on their path to salvation by having them follow the "narrow way" of spiritual accountability, or "the obedience of a disciple." These were such holy priests as Fr. George Kossov of Chekriak village, Fr. Nicholas Zagorovsky (Seraphim in monasticism), and Fr. Alexis Mechev of Moscow, whose son, Fr. Sergius, was a devoted disciple of St. Nektary right up to the very end of the life of his beloved Elder. Here is a narrative that sheds light on his discipleship.

A LITTLE WHILE HAD gone by since the death of Fr. Alexis,** and Fr. Sergius felt that it was beyond his strength to

* Taken from *Nadezhda,* no. 16 (1993).

** Fr. Alexis Mechev (†1923), Fr. Sergius' father and predecessor as rector of the St. Nicholas Church in Moscow. He was a great Elder in his own right.

guide such a numerous and difficult flock. "I won't save you, and I myself will perish with you" he later said about the thoughts he was having then. He decided to travel to see the Elder for a blessing to relinquish some of his spiritual children. Fr. Sergius sat for whole days at the Duminichi station but was unable to hire horses to get to the village, and so he returned to Moscow.

Some time later I went to see Fr. Nektary and, at the instructions of Fr. Sergius, told him how Fr. Sergius had tried to reach him but could not. "And he did well in not getting here," the Elder responded, "I wouldn't have blessed him to do that anyway."*

Fr. Nektary once said to me, "Did you know Fr. Alexis? All of Moscow knew him, but for the time being only half of Moscow knows Fr. Sergius. But he'll be greater than his father."

But Fr. Sergius, like many of us, was not immediately able to understand Fr. Nektary, who would act as a fool-for-Christ. It was often quite difficult to ascertain how to correctly take his words. Fr. Sergius said to someone, "I don't understand that kind of eldership. I speak to him about serious matters and he answers me with jokes." That's how it was in the beginning, but gradually Fr. Sergius' relationship with Fr. Nektary became more and more solid, as the Elder penetrated more deeply into his soul. Things were difficult for me as well. Knowing that he did not have long to be with us, the Elder blessed me to come to

* Fr. Sergius later related this about his trip: "It was the first time I had returned without having reached Kholmishche. And on that very day, which I was spending in solitude, I sensed with perfect clarity that I did not have the right to toss aside a matter that had been entrusted to me. So what if I exhaust my strength fruitlessly? So what if I ruin my health and end my life prematurely? I do not dare leave my post. No matter how miserable it is for me, no matter how difficult, and at times how senseless my labor seems to me, I will continue it to the end, until it is brought to an end by the will of God."

St. Nicholas Church on Maroseiko St. in Moscow, the parish church of Fr. Sergius Mechev and his father, Fr. Alexis. Photograph taken in the 1930s.

see him more often, and he would frequently appoint a date for my arrival. Once he said, "Come to see me as often as possible, and stay with me as long as you can."

Fr. Sergius did not always approve of these frequent visits. In part he felt sorry for me, knowing that these trips were expensive, and that all of my wages came from private lessons. In addition, he believed that he himself could resolve all my perplexities, and that I had no need to go for this to Fr. Nektary. Sometimes Fr. Sergius would say to me, "Why are you going to see Fr. Nektary? Why, you were just with him." I could only reply that Fr. Nektary had blessed me to come on that day.

I often did not understand the Elder, wept, became annoyed with him, and once said, "I'm not going to come to see you anymore." To this he, with a grin replied with a subtle irony in his voice, "Aren't you going to come?" The Elder knew, as I myself knew, that he held my soul so strongly in his hands, that I was unable not to come to see him. But I felt that Fr. Sergius did not yet understand this, that his heart had not yet totally affixed itself to the Elder.

Another Optina Elder, Fr. Anatole (Potapov), who had died one year before the repose of Fr. Alexis, used to bless the people while sitting in an armchair, since it was difficult for him to stand for a long time due to a large hernia. Therefore, when everyone came up to him in turn for a blessing, they would kneel. It sometimes happened in the Skete that someone, taking a blessing from Fr. Nektary, would kneel. This is why, when Fr. Nektary's spiritual children came to see him in Kholmishche, they would kneel before him when taking a blessing at their arrival or departure.

When Fr. Sergius came to see Fr. Nektary, he would be the first to go up to the Elder. Fr. Nektary would extend his hand to him, which Fr. Sergius would reverently kiss. Once, when everyone had already gone up to the Elder for a blessing at their

departure, Fr. Sergius again went up to Fr. Nektary, stood on his knees before him and, with a pure, childlike expression on his face said, "Batiushka, bless me too; make the sign of the Cross over me too!" The Elder bent down to him with a look of infinite affection and love and made the sign of the Cross over him. And on his next trip to see Fr. Nektary he met the Elder and took leave of him in the same fashion.

I had gotten into the habit, at my departure, when everyone had already taken their leave of the Elder, of receiving his blessing one more time unnoticed, so that the last blessing would always be mine. The Elder knew this and always helped me in this. Once Fr. Sergius, someone else, and I were leaving. We said goodbye to the Elder and walked out of his reception room through the vestibule into the landlord's side of the house. I was last. Fr. Nektary followed us, but no one noticed it but me. Going out into the vestibule, I took a quick step backwards and turned to the Elder. Fr. Nektary blessed me and right then went back into his room, and I rushed to catch up with the others.

Another time I had a stubborn rival. Fr. Sergius, another young man (not Fr. Sergius' spiritual son) who had visited Optina earlier and was coming to Kholmishche for the first time, and I were leaving. Fr. Nektary suggested to Fr. Sergius that he linger for one more day, but Fr. Sergius would in no way agree, assuring the Elder that urgent business awaited him in Moscow. We took leave of the Elder and went out into the landlord's side of the house. While Fr. Sergius was packing his things I ran in to see Fr. Nektary. Behind me came the young man. The Elder began to treat us with candies, and since we hadn't returned for quite a while, Fr. Sergius lost his patience, came to Fr. Nektary, and began nervously to hurry our departure. Fr. Nektary met Fr. Sergius with a big piece of halvah—"a piece of the cow's nose," as he expressed it—and told Fr. Sergius that he had to fortify himself for the road. After this Fr. Nektary brought a

glass of cold tea over to him to wash down the halvah. And the youth and I raced one another to receive "the last blessing." Fr. Sergius became totally flustered; he stood there looking, was silent, and suddenly with a hurt voice said, "And what about me, Batiushka?" The Elder joyfully blessed him. But even that time I still managed to receive "the last blessing" from him.

We were late for the train and sat for a long time in the station. But later it turned out that somewhere further on there had been a wreck involving a freight train, and passenger movement was suspended until the tracks could be cleared. Although Fr. Sergius arrived in Moscow significantly later than he had wanted, all of his "urgent business" had somehow taken care of itself successfully.

Another time Fr. Sergius, extremely fatigued from his endless cares, became so high-strung that it was difficult to talk with him. I asked him, "Are you my spiritual father?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Shouldn't I tell you everything that I think, that I do, that I go through?"

"Yes, of course," he replied.

"Well, that's what I think, too," I said, "but when I speak to you, you begin to get irritated, and this evokes the desire in me not to say anything to you. If I'm thinking or acting incorrectly, it's better to explain to me why I'm in error than to get irritated."

Fr. Sergius instantly began to speak in a calm voice. But when I went to see Fr. Nektary I began to complain to him about Fr. Sergius. "He's become totally impossible," I said. "You can't tell him anything; he gets mad at everyone. I say a word to him and he gives me ten in reply." The Elder answered, "You know how children get angry? They get angry and then they smile. That's the way it is with him. And in his soul there is no vexation whatever." And I returned fully consoled.

I already knew how Fr. Sergius valued the Elder, how warmly he loved him, and with what interest he always listened when I told him about my trips. Therefore this time too I eagerly shared my impressions with him. "And, you know—I complained about you to Fr. Nektary," I immediately declared to him. "Well, well—tell me how you complained about me to Fr. Nektary," Fr. Sergius said with a merry voice. From time to time, in good moments of special spiritual closeness, Fr. Sergius would address me with the familiar "you."

For a long time Fr. Nektary tried to persuade me that I needed to put some effort into obtaining a mitre for Fr. Sergius. I objected that Fr. Sergius had absolutely no need of one. "He doesn't need it," said Fr. Nektary, "but you, his spiritual children need it." I, of course, took no action, although Olga Efimovna Korzinina, who had already obtained a mitre from Metropolitan Sergius for Fr. Vladimir Bogdanov, and another one for someone else, assured me that she could very easily obtain a mitre for our Fr. Sergius, and that she had some nice stones for a mitre. And each time I came to see him, Fr. Nektary would ask me, "Have you taken the trouble to obtain a mitre for Fr. Sergius? You're committing a great omission by not busying yourself with this."

I was in complete despair; I didn't know what to do. After all, I couldn't ask Fr. Sergius himself—he'd refuse, and what would the Elder say then? I spoke with several members of our community—some were for it, some were against it. Everyone was confused by the Elder's directive. Finally we arranged for two or three of us to meet with Dr. Peter Alexandrovich (our president). Peter Alexandrovich gave his consent for us to meet at his place, but warned that he himself would not get mixed up in this business. But now there was a new predicament: Boris Alexandrovich and Maria Nikolaevna said that we did not have the right to meet at Peter Alexandrovich's without the blessing

of Fr. Sergius. Consequently, someone had to tell him about this. But who should tell him? And how would he explain the reason for the meeting? Everyone decided that I should speak to Fr. Sergius.

There was nothing to do. I asked Fr. Sergius to let me have a word with him. He happily agreed, and invited me into Fr. Alexis' room, while Maria Nikolaevna and Boris Alexandrovich waited in the dining room. I informed Fr. Sergius that this evening, after the Vigil, several of us wanted to meet at Peter Alexandrovich's place. Fr. Sergius' face became serious. "What for?" he asked. My whole soul became so pained that I had no strength to explain anything, to say anything, and with difficulty I replied, "To obtain a mitre for you." Fr. Sergius nervously jumped up from his chair and threateningly uttered, "For me? A mitre? I forbid it!" A reaction came over me. The sore point, finally, was resolved. My nerves, like strained strings, suddenly went limp, and I began to sob. Fr. Sergius, who could not look calmly upon a person crying, anxiously clasped my head with both hands and pressed it to his breast, trying to calm me down: "My dear, don't worry, calm down." And under the influence of his sincere kindness I calmed down. Fr. Sergius again sat down at the small table and I explained the whole matter to him. When I said that Peter Alexandrovich had refused to take part in it, Fr. Sergius joyfully exclaimed, "Good boy, Peter Alexandrovich! My thanks to him." And he explained to me that earlier P. A. wanted to obtain some kind of award for Fr. Sergius, but he forbade him. Peter Alexandrovich gave him his promise never again to do this.

I returned to the dining room and said that the meeting would not be held, and briefly explained why. Maria Nikolaevna was very happy, and rubbed her hands with glee. Boris Alexandrovich looked ahead in bewilderment and muttered

something indistinctly; I could only make out that "It's just fine, anyway...." Fr. Nektary didn't ask about the mitre again.

It was the spring of 1928. For a whole year no one had succeeded in visiting Fr. Nektary. They would go and return with nothing. The landlord wouldn't let anyone in to see the Elder; he said that the Elder himself didn't want to receive anyone and that the village soviet was keeping his house under surveillance. All that reached us were remote rumors, through the landlord's relatives, that Fr. Nektary was often ill.

At the beginning of April 1928, Fr. Boris (Kholchev) and I went to Kholmishche with the blessing of Fr. Sergius. The snow in the forest was melting; there were wide streams everywhere, and no road.

With great difficulty we finally reached the village on foot. It was already dark and everyone in the village was asleep, and the landlord let us into the house. In the morning they called us to the Elder.

Fr. Nektary had asked to be lifted from the bed and seated in an armchair, and then he told them to call us. He was very weak. Maria said that he hadn't sat in the chair for a long time, and only when he learned that we had come did he wish to move from the bed to the chair.

Fr. Nektary blessed us and said with difficulty, "When is Fr. Sergius coming?" Those were his first words. We replied that Fr. Sergius wanted very much to come and had entrusted us with asking him about this. The Elder said that we should inform Fr. Sergius that he should come as soon as possible. We sent a very long telegram to Moscow, and Fr. Sergius arrived quite soon, together with Dr. Sergius Alexandrovich Nikitin.* Fr. Sergius approached the bed of the dying Elder and dropped to his knees. Fr. Nektary greeted him with the words, "I'm not

* The future Bishop Stephen. See p. 439.

worried about you." "Thank you, Batiushka, thank you," Fr. Sergius replied, joyfully and with emotion.

Maria, a nun from Gomel, who was living with the landlord and looking after Fr. Nektary exclaimed, "That means Fr. Sergius won't be sick anymore!" (Before this, Fr. Sergius had suffered from severe headaches.)

Fr. Boris looked at me and asked softly, "Do you understand what Fr. Nektary wanted to say?" "I understand," I replied. It was entirely clear for both of us. This was a period of church strife. Fr. Nektary knew that under no circumstances would Fr. Sergius waver, nor would he deny his convictions. And the Elder's words came true.

Later Fr. Sergius conversed with the Elder for a few minutes in private. The next day Fr. Sergius left together with Fr. Boris and Sergius Alexandrovich. To the Elder's request that he come again soon, Fr. Sergius gave his promise to return in a week. Fr. Nektary wanted very much for Fr. Sergius to be present at his repose but, unfortunately, this did not happen.

Fr. Sergius later told me that he intended to come to Kholmishche again after a week, but there were so many whims and quarrels among his spiritual children. Even his wife, Euphrosynia Nikolaevna, began to try to talk him out of it, pleading his fatigue and the difficulty of the road. He yielded to everyone and did not go, for which he greatly sorrowed later.

Fr. Sergius asked me to send him a telegram when the Elder's condition became extremely bad. Sergius Alexandrovich said that the Elder could live another two or three weeks, but no longer.

A few days later I tried to send Fr. Sergius a telegram, but even on horseback I couldn't get to the Duminichi station or to the administrative village, where there was a telegraph. The snow was melting rapidly, the rivers were overflowing, and Kholmishche was cut off from the outside world.

The Elder was weakening noticeably with each day. Only on the eve of Fr. Nektary's repose did his spiritual son, Fr. Adrian Rymarenko, arrive unexpectedly from Kiev. He read the Prayers for the Departure of the Soul over him and then vested him, together with the local village priest.

When he received the telegram about the Elder's repose, Fr. Sergius came immediately. There also came Fr. Peter Petrikov, Fr. Boris Kholchev and Fr. Andrei Elbson—spiritual children of the Elder—and some people from the laity. The Korzinins, husband and wife, brought the coffin and a wooden cross. From Optina there arrived the Elder's young cell-attendant, Fr. Peter (a simple monk); but the rest waited in Kozelsk, thinking that the Elder's body would surely be brought there.

Not long before the Elder's repose Maria had asked Fr. Nektary three times in my presence where to bury him. By that time he was already hardly speaking, but he answered us with gestures. Each time the Elder pointed with his hand back in the direction of the village cemetery. And each time, at Maria's question as to whether to carry him out to Kozelsk, Fr. Nektary shook his head in the negative.*

* The Elder also forbade them to bury him beside the Church of the Protection of the Theotokos in Kholmishche, saying that it would be worse than a pigsty there. And that is how it turned out. The church was destroyed, and on the cathedral square a market was set up with a dance floor.

Nadezhda Alexandrovna Pavlovich—a poet and a devoted spiritual daughter of Elder Nektary. Photographed here in 1912, during her early college years.

20

In the Light of the Elder's Sunset

NADEZHDA ALEXANDROVNA PAVLOVICH*

Not long before the blessed repose of the last great Optina Elder, God moved the obstinate heart of a young soul and brought her to him. The Elder, seeing the genuine zeal of a creative Christian who was thirsting for the meaning of life, gradually broke down her resistance by a thorough understanding of her poetic soul. The taming of such an entirely modern girl by the hand of the great spiritual master resulted in a personality that managed to triumph over the surrounding militant godlessness, and which was instrumental in preserving Optina Monastery, which is blossoming today.

In the spring of 1923 the churches of Optina Monastery were closed and the monks were forced to leave. By this time there were 250 brothers left in Optina; many of them had been living there for twenty to forty years. It was proposed to them by the communists that any that would renounce monasticism

* From her letter to Metropolitan Benjamin (Fedchenkov), written in approximately 1948. Taken from *God's People: My Spiritual Encounters*, pp. 160-175.

would be allowed to remain there to live. To those that would be banished there would be issued, from their belongings, two changes of clothing and underwear and a few dishes—and that would be it. Not one of the Optina monks renounced monasticism. Sixty men were left there temporarily to maintain the museum and to liquidate the equipment.

Elder Nektary was ordered to move beyond the bounds of the Kaluga Province. A little over two miles from its border, within the Briansk Province is the village of Plokhino. A half mile from there was the farm of the now-reposed Basil Petrovich Osin, a close spiritual son of the Elder. The Elder went there first, after being freed from the Kozelsk prison. He took his young cell-attendant, Fr. Peter, with him. The Osins gave Fr. Nektary a separate little house. Soon two of the Elder's spiritual daughters arrived there. Batiushka was deeply shaken and sad, and sometimes wept for whole days, begging that no one turn to him for any kind of advice. His only consolation was in prayer. Once someone who was leaving him turned and saw how he, with his hands outstretched, like a child calling its mother, was turned towards the icons. He was engaged in a great struggle in his soul. He related to some of his spiritual children that all the reposed Optina Elders had appeared to him and said, "If you want to be with us, do not abandon your spiritual children." And he then returned to the work of eldership. Those who lived with him assured us that his spiritual turning point was obvious. One morning the Elder came out to them in all his former power of spirit.

He had to leave the farm and move beyond the border of the province. Eight and a half miles away, already in the Briansk Province, was the village of Kholmishche, where Osin's brother-in-law lived—Andrei Efimovich Denezhkin, a widower who had a nice house. He invited the Elder to live with him, offering him a separate half of the house.

The Elder sent one of his spiritual daughters to inspect the house.* Outwardly everything seemed suitable, and the landlord amiable. Fr. Nektary moved, but after a month it became clear that life here would be difficult. The landlord was coarse, greedy and fainthearted. He was embarrassed before the Elder and was fearful for himself, as the owner of the house, and wanted to get rich from possible visitors. But the Elder humbled himself before him in mundane matters. He didn't open a window without his permission, and, taking care of his own business, ignored him. To his friends' suggestion that they settle him somewhere else, he replied, "No, the Lord brought me here."

In the face of all afflictions he was even-tempered and good-natured. At first Fr. Peter lived with him, then a young nun, Maria, who had been tonsured there with the Elder's blessing by a visiting bishop. She was a young woman of a difficult, hysterical nature, whom the landlord dreamt of marrying.

I speak of this, that the heaviness and tension of the purely mundane conditions might be understood. I must also add here a certain act of "foolishness" of the Elder. At one point he was forbidden to receive visitors, and so they would come to him secretly. The aforementioned bishop came. Elder Nektary asked, "Where is he right now?" "In the rye field," was the answer. "Well, good; let him sit there until evening."

In the evening the Elder sent for him, and when the latter furtively went up onto the porch, he was met by a loud choir of visitors who had arrived earlier, singing "Eis polla eti, despota!" and the smiling Elder. The windows were open, and it was early in the evening. All the villagers were at home. The landlord was terrified and infuriated, and yet at the same time was flattered that he was receiving a hierarch.

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* This was N. Pavlovich herself.—Ed.

The Elder tested almost all who came to him in one way or another, each according to his measure. The more difficult a person was, the more patient Fr. Nektary was. Those who were closest to him in the mundane sense were usually the most remote from him spiritually, or were those who required maximal care—spiritual infants or "rebels" against eldership.

I must say a few things about myself, so as to demonstrate what the Elder was like. I was terrible.... I, like a stubborn horse, pulled off my harness and renounced obedience. But before God and the Elder's memory I can say that with as much strength of soul as I had, I loved my father and Elder, and he knew this. This is the way he dealt with me: with gentleness and love he was always able to twist me around his little finger. When I was in a state of contrition, he had me give my word that no matter when he summoned me, no matter where I was, I would come to him. Then there began every possible "examination and maneuver," as he called them, at which I constantly failed. Once I left him for almost two years. I missed him terribly, sinned daringly, and wrote to him about it—"How do you like that!"—but he was silent. Later (by his prayers!) I began to come to my senses; but I thought that it was all over—that there was no returning to him. Suddenly he summoned me, reminding me of the word I had given. I went. He met me like a father, not like an elder: "Stay here a while, live with me. I need you!"

I replied, "All right, but not under obedience."

"Fine! Just stay here for a while."

He was extraordinarily kind, simple and sincere—he spoke with me for entire evenings, and talked about himself. But I still did not want to go under obedience—I was afraid, I was exhausted. I was constantly afraid of suffering and was very self-willed. And the idea that he—even he—might send me to suffering, I could not bear. I could not endure the idea that he (I'm writing this that it might be understood) had sent me out

into the world and there, apparently, had abandoned me without help. By saving him, I had broken my former connections. My wages were paltry, and no one wanted to have anything to do with me. I was "gone to the dogs" after two years of life near the Elder. When I saw what a position I was in, I wrote to him in plain words, the way I'd be able to write to my own father, asking him either to permit me to return to him, or to help me materially, until I found work. But he answered me with an indifferent letter, saying that he wasn't living too badly (I had been able to save everything from the "hut" for my "grandfather," and had supported him*) and that he wished the same for me. And that was it. From my viewpoint at that time it seemed as though this "holy" Elder of mine had acted towards me in a way that I would not have acted towards my own friends. And this I could not endure. I would have forgiven someone else, but I couldn't forgive him, and everything around me fell apart. The only thing that stopped me, that arrested my headlong fall, was an extraordinary mercy of God, a Voice I heard. But nevertheless I did not understand and left the Elder. And now, almost two years later, he was summoning me to Kholmishche. I came out of a sense of honor, since he had appealed to my word of honor and had made the excuse that I was needed, and also because, with all my bitterness, I loved him and felt sorry for him. But to go under obedience again?—never!

I lived there for a week. There wasn't any hint of discipline, etc.

"Nadenka, I need to chop up some sugar, but my hands hurt."

"Certainly, Batiushka!"

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* So as to free Fr. Nektary from prison in 1924 N. Pavlovich had to pass him off as her grandfather. She succeeded in getting his sentence (to be shot) commuted to exile.

He had a little device for chopping. I chopped. He walked around the room, passed by me and patted me on the head. A very sweet nun, who was staying there temporarily, came in.

"Matushka, what's Nadezhda Alexandrovna doing?"

With a smile, Matushka said, "She's fulfilling her obedience."

"Nadenka, Matushka can even see from a distance that you're fulfilling your obedience."

I jumped up. "If that's the way it is, I won't chop!"

He silently took the sugar and began to chop it. His hands were swollen, and he winced. I took it from him and began to chop. And then my Elder forgave me.

He was usually gentle, as with a little child, but because I was talking with my friends until Compline on the day that I confessed (about which neither I nor my friends informed him), he sent me at nine in the evening to the village of Stenino, a mile short of Optina. I had to return along a thicket of small trees, where wolves roamed in packs, and it was a year of famine.

Once I was in a rebellious state (I don't even remember why), and I wrote a poem, which began thus:

I am a stranger in this white encampment,
This white encampment filled with churches and spires.
Beyond the gates the wind, tempestuous, beckons;
A snowy nightingale with song inspires.

And it ended like this:

Those I recall are past my comprehension,
In mantias, untroubled and gray-haired.

Since everything I wrote I would read to Fr. Nektary, I read this to him also, and asked in a somewhat irritating way, "Do you bless me to print it?" Without a blessing I did not dare, not

only to walk outside the monastery enclosure, but even to give material aid to someone, or to read a book.

He calmly replied, "Print it! One's works must be taken as a whole. Milton wrote some terrible—one might even say frightful—things; but on the whole, he's good!"

The Elder often manifested his wondrous clairvoyance through jokes. Once I came to see him [in Kholmishche] with Nina Balmont. We slept in the landlord's half of the house, which was separated from the rest by a cold corridor. The Elder could not hear our conversations, and those who lived in the house had all gone about their business. The morning was beautiful and frosty. Nina looked out the window.

"Ah, if only I could go for a sleigh ride right now!"

The snow glittered outside the window. I cautiously noted (remembering my walk to Stenino through the wolf-infested ravine): "Watch out—don't get ashes sprinkled on our heads!*"

We were both quite merry, and happy that we had come to see the Elder—and we were young.

Before tea we went in for a blessing. Fr. Nektary blessed us affectionately and said, "Ninochka, I understand that it's very nice to go sleigh-riding, but every commissar will see you—you're such a grand, hefty fellow."

But Nina was tall and slender. We only exchanged glances. Then the Elder, with small steps, went behind the partition, looked for something, and came out.

"Nadenka, go to Matushka and ask for a little jar—to sprinkle ashes."

The Elder had a wonderful sense of humor:

"I'm still afraid that you're going to send me to a monastery."

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* A reference to the possibility of their getting themselves killed, since ashes are sprinkled on the coffins of the reposed as they are being buried.—Ed.

"What do you mean?! I'm going to send you straight to Paradise."

"Batiushka, if it's possible, tell me—have you had visions?"

"Well I'm not going to tell *you* about it!"

In order to show what spiritual power and grace Elder Nektary had, and how he tested people and led them, I'll relate how I wound up with him....

In 1921 my friend died. My soul was continually on the border between the two worlds. I had enough sense to understand the danger of my state of soul, and once, from my whole heart, I began to pray that a teacher and guide be sent down to me. I believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, but I was far from any feeling for the Church. I had not managed to finish the prayer (this was in the morning) when an acquaintance (not a close one) came to see me and, as if by chance, asked me: "Do you know Leo Bruni? He's a disciple of the Optina Elder Nektary."

I had known Leo since I was fifteen, but had never heard of his connection with Optina. As soon as I saw my guest off I ran to Lev. "Are you the Elder's disciple?"

"Yes."

"Could you give him a letter?"

"Sure. I'm going to Optina any day. Let's go together."

"No, but take the letter."

I wrote the Elder a letter—like a confession.

In reply I received a *Trinity Leaflet* on the commemoration of the dead (which, to tell the truth, shocked me—after Rudolf Steiner, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Vladimir Soloviev, etc., etc.), and a verbal answer—"if she really wants to, all right, she can come."

I didn't like this either. But at that very time I had a dream—there was some kind of room without wallpaper, with walls made of boards. There was a table set for tea and a

Nadezhda A. Pavlovich at the time she met Elder Nektary.

cupboard. Before it was a porch with a staircase. I understood in the dream that this was Optina. Monks were walking around. At last, there was Elder Nektary, only a bit younger than he was in fact. They all sat at the table. I was seized by such contrition and repentance that I huddled in the corner, behind the cupboard, and wept there. Then the Elder stood up, took me by the hand, seated me, and poured me some tea. I awoke in an anxious and contrite state, but the leaflet and the reply (that is, all that had happened when I was wide awake)—I did not like.

I didn't go. At Christmas Leo again went to see the Elder. The latter dug through his letters for a long time in front of him, and then told him to tell me that he would have given me a further answer now, but his secretary had misplaced my letter. I became angry—in the first place, what kind of secretaries could elders have? (At that time I had just gotten around to finish reading the *Diveyevo Chronicle*—Elder Seraphim did not have a secretary!) In the second place, I had written my letter as a confession, and he had given it to all kinds of secretaries, and they were so careless as to lose such letters.

Not only did I not go, I gave up on Optina. But since I was depressed, and it was difficult and awful for me, I tried to deaden the pain with profligacy and all kinds of emotional outbursts.

In June a publisher came to me and proposed that I take part in a book series, *Religion and the Revolution,* by writing about Optina now.

"I've never been there, and don't know anything."

"Go there and have a look at it on the spot."

"I have no money."

"Here's an advance."

This was so staggering that I took the money and went there in July of 1922. I got to Optina on the eve of the Feast of

the Kazan icon of the Theotokos (July 8). Leo and his family had already moved there. I went straight to see him. They met me nicely, but Leo was terribly embarrassed by something. I asked him what the matter was. He hesitated, and then said, "In May the Elder called me and gave me your letter to read.... (It wasn't lost at all!)

I blushed. Lord, now my confession is not only given to secretaries, but even to Leo!

"... And he told me to answer it."

Leo excused himself—"I don't know what to answer."

"You write," the Elder said, "that there's no place in Optina for people like her."

But Leo didn't have the courage to write to me that way. He hoped that I would not come, and concealed his disobedience from the Elder. But I came.

I said, "The Elder's the boss here. I'll leave by the first train, and return the money to the publisher.

But the train ran only twice a week. Nina, Leo's wife, suggested that I go to the "hut." And she used cunning: "There will be a lot of people there; the Elder won't notice you, but you can have a look at him." And I agreed. We went.

Leo went to the men's side, while Nina and I went to the women's reception room where the icon "It is Truly Meet" was.

The Elder came out for the blessing. I recognized him. This was the Elder of my dream. I stood there with the knowledge that this teacher, whom I had entreated, was the one who had said, "There's no place in Optina for people like her."

He silently blessed me and Nina, but barely had the general blessing ended, when the cell-attendant came for Nina. She asked me to wait around for her, and after five minutes she came out and called me. The Elder stood in the middle of the cell, and Leo was kneeling near the armchair with a guilty look. The Elder asked me my name, blessed me, and said

with old-fashioned politeness (Nina and I later called it "the manners of an old marquis"): "I'm very happy, Nadenka, to make your acquaintance."

The way he moved, the way he moved the chair closer to me, was filled with an intangible, old-style elegance. His movements were extraordinarily balanced. He asked me with the same almost worldly courtesy, whether I had had a good trip, whether I was tired, etc., while Leo continued kneeling.

I said, "Forgive me for coming. I didn't know. Although I've had an offer to write a book about Optina, I consider it my duty to leave, and I'm only waiting for a train."

I was neither insulted nor humbled. I accepted this simply, as something that had to be, but looked with pain at the wondrous features of the man from my dream. Well, so what! What can you do! I didn't even repent, since the whole thing was hopeless.

The Elder replied, "No, stay! The Mother of God brought you here."

Then he asked Leo ironically how it was that he had been disobedient, but he forgave him. And everyone became silent. The Elder's face underwent a change. Everything temporal and amiable, and even the traces of old age disappeared. Before me was a Face—almost ageless, distinct in its features, filled with a special power, not radiant, but as if a thousand years old. And I understood—here it was! Now it starts! He arose. I arose as well.

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to confess to me?"

"Yes."

"Go to church. Compline is under way there right now; in half an hour come back to me. Have you had dinner?"

I had eaten meat that day.

"Never mind, come!"

I entered the Optina church, and returned to the Elder half an hour later. He was waiting for me. At the Confession he was extraordinarily kind and merciful, but sometimes he named my sins himself. I was in a state of inexplicable bliss. Then he spoke with me some more, kept me in Optina to write the book, and promised to help.

"Can I come to see you?"

"Yes, whenever you want, little dove, only not on feast days and not on the eves of feast days, since I'll have many visitors."

I left as if on wings. The next day, on the Feast of the Kazan icon, I received Communion. Fr. Nektary said that the Kazan Mother of God was my special protectress.

I bided my time (for the sake of propriety) for two or three days, and then went to the "hut." At the general blessing Fr. Nektary was very affectionate with me but didn't receive me, saying that he was busy. I waited another two days, but he again did not receive me. Now I began to go every day and sat in the "hut" for hours; he was quite congenial but didn't receive me. Then I began to wonder if something was the matter with me. Finally, I remembered that at Confession I had not mentioned a great sin—not because I was concealing it, but because I had forgotten it and had not repented much over it, though I knew that, objectively, it was a great sin.

I wrote to the Elder about this and begged forgiveness. He became even more affectionate at the general blessing, but did not receive me. Then, in front of everyone, I got on my knees and said, "Forgive me!" He placed his hand on my head and repeated three times, "All is forgiven; all is forgiven; all is forgiven!" And right then took me in.

Here he received a vow of obedience from me, and I became his daughter, and he my father and teacher. He took me through all that I had experienced in the dream (I had not told

him the dream) and finally said, "At this point I should have served you some tea, but my cell-attendant has left"—and, smiling, he dismissed me.

In those days I was like uncultivated earth—not only untilled, but even choked with weeds; and it was with great patience and wisdom that he labored over me. Even now I've only begun to understand more, and therefore there is a greater demand on me; but I did not live up to the Elder's relationship with me. All my friends and peers went ahead of me, and he gradually took them to himself. I sometimes became terrified, when I thought that the Lord's mercy was not to the measure that I deserved—that if another person had been given what I had been given, he would have given his whole self to God. But I kept wasting time and did not overcome my egoism. I feared suffering, though I understood that afflictions are spiritually unavoidable. This meant that I had an insufficiency of faith, that I had not given myself enough to the Lord. And I was afraid that "there's no place in Optina for someone like me."

The Elder, when he was saying his last farewell to me, said that he was taking everything of mine upon himself, but that there was one thing that I must endure myself.

"Bear it, endure it," he said (and this suffering would be such—as was said concretely in our conversation—that I would, perhaps, even contemplate suicide!). "I would bow down to your feet, but I have a hernia," he said. When I thought about this suffering, I fall into a panic. Right then I said, "I'm afraid!" But he replied, "Preserve Orthodoxy, receive Holy Communion, and everything will be fine." I understood that only in this could I obtain strength and patience, and that the Elder's promise itself was his great mercy and boldness before the Lord. I also understood the necessity of the Cross, but all the same I was afraid—afraid in every way—both of the suffering itself (after all, I didn't know what it would consist in,

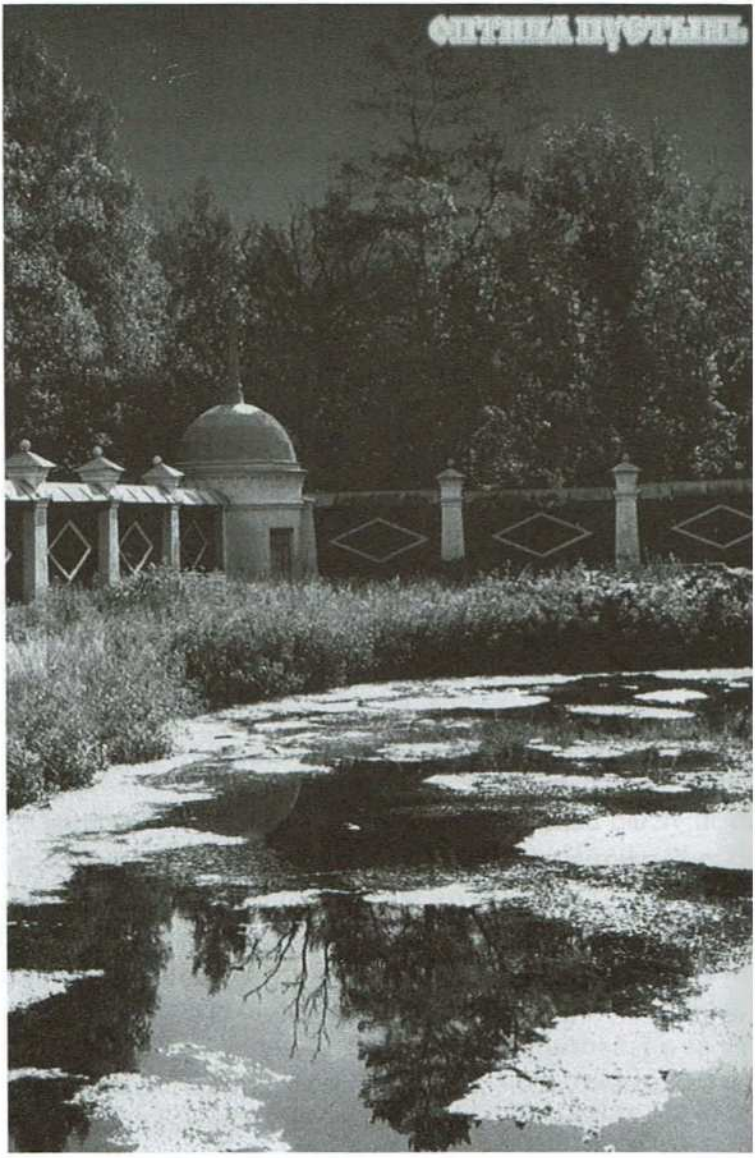
N. A. Pavlovich at the grave of Elder Nektary
in Kholmishche in the late 1960s.

and that, perhaps, made it even more terrible), and of the idea that I would not hold out. But meanwhile he took everything upon himself and I lived with minimal suffering. (I broke my legs, but without any special pain, and I was robbed—I even rejoiced, that everything was being eased for me.)

... When the Elder died, on the day of his funeral he gave me, as it were, a farewell sign. I had been smoking all those years—he knew it and did not forbid it. Once he did forbid it temporarily. I submitted to it, but suffered terribly, and he was merciful and lifted the ban. It would happen that I would be sitting with him for several hours, and he would laugh and say, "You're probably languishing for a smoke. Well, go ahead, have a smoke!" Of course, before Communion I didn't smoke. When I left for the funeral I took fifteen to twenty packs of cigarettes. When you're agitated you smoke more. I wept, and then went to the garden for a smoke. On the day of the funeral we all received Holy Communion, which meant that I hadn't smoked since morning. After Communion I also hadn't smoked, and I certainly couldn't walk behind the coffin to the cemetery with a cigarette! I drove back with someone from the clergy, and it was also awkward to smoke then; but once I had eaten lunch I ran to the garden—that's how much I wanted it! I had barely lit the cigarette and had not even inhaled, when I was thrown from the apple tree under which I stood to another one, opposite it—about five feet—and I was seized by terror. I'm unable to convey what this was. Everything around me seemed to be in a state of motionless motion and to have lost its natural order. I was as scared as a puppy, and cried out, "Batiushka, I won't do it!" (Although he had not forbidden me, in my subconscious I knew that he couldn't be pleased with my smoking, and the "cat knew that she had eaten the meat.") In an instant everything ceased and again took on its normal appearance. I regained consciousness, holding the extinguished cigarette under

the apple tree toward which I had been thrown, and trudged into the house. Since I'd always been a skeptic, I thought almost right then with dejected irony: "It's very well to scream 'I won't do it!' but what am I going to do now if I have the desire to smoke?" But from that moment to this day I have not wanted to. Though I have not committed this sin once, I never judge smokers, and I don't test my aversion to tobacco smoke. The next day I awoke with a strange feeling, just as if my whole body had been injected with cocaine (as when teeth are pulled), and I had no desire to smoke. Nina knew (I told her). She was terribly interested and asked every half hour, "Don't you want to smoke?" "I don't." Nine days went by like that. I hadn't thrown out a single pack. I went to see Nina and Leo at the Optina fish farm. Once on a spring evening on the veranda I had the desire to smoke (not physically, but emotionally), for comfort, or whatever. Then I prayed and remembered the Elder, and it all left me.

I deliberately sat in the smoking car on the return trip. People smoked beside me, but I didn't want to. This was as if a gift to me from my Elder, and a farewell blessing.



The still waters of timeless monasticism continue to reflect eternal paradisal yearning in the renewed Optina Monastery. Pictured are Elder Moses' pond in the Skete and a cloistered tower with a weather vane in the form of an angel.

21

At the Grave

NUN MARIA*

One truth of spiritual life is that a man who prays to God becomes aware of God's beauty—both the beauty of the outward world of God's creation and, eventually, of the interior beauty of his soul as it faces God. The arrival in Holy Russia of godless cruelty and an insensitive consumer mentality, which stampedes over beauty on its way, has brought about an extreme ugliness in the outward arrangement of things and, at the same time, has caused a deep longing for the "paradise lost" of the believing soul that yearns for Divine beauty. The following account, a lamentation and epilogue, hints at the spiritual beauty that the holy Elders evoked in mortals who could perceive the reality beyond death. The two crosses on Elder Nektary's grave symbolize the double portion of Divine beauty that a simple believer can acquire.

HERE IS THE VILLAGE CEMETERY, one or two miles from the village. No sooner do you come to the gates in the fence than you sense that without pronouncing the monastic prayer it would be inconceivable to enter. With your heart you hear "Amen." You enter, as if into the "hut." You fall down with your head to the grave-mound and have no strength to tear yourself away from the earth. You place the flowers you have brought

* Taken from *Optina Monastery and its Era*, pp. 539-41.

and sit on the bench by the grave, and everything in your recollections is clear and alive—just as if Fr. Nektary himself were standing in his room at Andrei Efimovich's. Now his house has been torn down and he has moved to another village. In no way could you ever imagine him dead, even though you're sitting by his grave. And nature! Here in the cemetery the beauty is indescribable. The age-old pines, firs and birches furnish much shade and coolness; the dear sun tenderly peeps through their dense tops. But then again, the fields surrounding the cemetery and the hamlets quaintly nestled in the slopes of the hills are brightly bathed in the searing summer sun, and the horizon is entirely bordered by the green velvet of the pine forest. In gray weather the whole horizon is obscured by a smokey, blue-gray shroud. The hamlets look like little gray spots; here you will not encounter white stone houses—all are of wood. But by the Elder's grave behind the fence it becomes yet warmer, yet dearer.

I arrived in Kozelsk on July 18 (Old Style), on the eve of the feast of St. Seraphim. The weather did not permit us to make the journey—it was raining and there were puddles. After three or four days the weather settled down, and four of us set out with small travelling bags on the 27-mile trip to dear Fr. Nektary. After the dust of Kozelsk and the din of every sort of vehicle, the stillness of the countryside was especially pleasant. The environment of the Kaluga province is distinguished by a special beauty. The horizon is entirely skirted by forests. The paths through the sandy soil wind most gracefully through the green grass. Do you remember the road through the Optina meadow to the ferry? Thanks to the sandy soil such paths delight the gaze everywhere. We left at four in the afternoon with the plan of travelling eight miles and then spending the night. And that's how it worked out. We stopped over at the house of acquaintances, our kin in the spirit—all children of one father—and so there was no end to our reminiscences and talks. We rested, and at ten in the

The road to the village cemetery in Kholmishche.

morning headed further down the road. I could not walk quickly due to weakness, and one of my companions could not walk quickly due to excessive corpulence; in a word, we took it easy and went another eight miles on the second day. We spent the night in a place where one of my companions had been a teacher, with the Elder's blessing. Again there were recollections of the distant past. Finally, the last eleven miles—and we reached our desired goal; that is, we arrived at the village where our dear one had lived. Casting down our travelling bags, without resting from the road, we ran towards the cemetery. It was already nine in the evening. A young woman, who had been at the grave two days earlier, joined us along the way. She volunteered to show us the way. We walked ... another two miles remained. We dismissed our guide. It had already become dark. The sky was obscured by clouds and we got lost. We ran and ran, but the cemetery ran away from us. We would have decided to

return home, but our hearts burned with the desire to cling to the dear grave-mound. Finally, we were at our destination. In the darkness the square, overgrown with ancient pines, firs and birches, stood out in relief. Walking around the cemetery from the northern side, we turned to the west. Right along the road we had to turn left and we were at the dear fence. Feelings, inexpressible in words, rushed upon all of us. Not speaking, we stopped at the fence, not daring to enter without a blessing, as has happened before. We somehow didn't believe it—were we really already by our dear one? After asking a blessing, we did not want to tear ourselves away from the precious grave. We had made up our minds to spend the night on it, but we were tired, and the cool night air reminded us of good sense. It was already the dead of night, and there wasn't a sound besides the tramp of our footsteps.

My whole being was refreshed on that trip. Gazing upon the surrounding nature of that region I cried out in my heart: O Lord, I am unworthy to see the beauty of Thy creation with my earthly eyes. And if it is so good with Thee on earth, then how must it be with Thee in Paradise?! Involuntarily one recalls the sticheron on Forgiveness Sunday, "Adam's Lament": "Adam sat before Paradise and lamenting his nakedness, he wept ... O Paradise!"

We were shown the shortest route from Fr. Nektary's village—instead of seven miles, three-and-a-half or four. For me this was a great blessing. My foot was truly tired. I tried to take long rests. I spread out a raincoat and stretched out full length. That was the only way I could rest my foot. I lay there for a long, long time and we ate. One of my Optina friends was with me the whole time. I forced her to linger on my account—but I made my way slowly, with a walking stick. We walked four miles from one in the afternoon until eight in the evening. The whole road presented nothing special; the surrounding beauty

had become commonplace to our sight. Then we came up to a large village. The golden crosses of two church bell towers shone brightly in the rays of the setting sun. The grandiose church, roughly built in the form of a ship, was prominently silhouetted against the background of reddish-gold rays of sunset. It was somehow transparent with its narrow, still-unglazed window niches. The not very tall bell tower over the trapeza suggested a crown, adorned with a cross. I counted sixteen windows, over which there was a lacy border of eaten-away red bricks. This architecture, outstanding for a village church, compelled us to admire it for a long time. Then, all of a sudden, before our eyes and right beneath our feet, a whole picture opened up—to the left was a ravine, leading to a valley. We needed to bear right, so as to continue to the opposite edge of this ravine which, by a wide prominence, proceeded upwards, overlaid with bright emerald green in the gentle illumination of the setting sun, and which drew us to itself. We had not succeeded in walking a hundred steps when an even more picturesque scene brought us to even greater astonishment. Right there beneath our feet, from north to south, a ravine appeared, overgrown here and there with bushes, but for the most part covered with grass. From above, the eastern edges of this ravine were still all illumined by the parting rays of the setting sun, while below the evening shadows had already fallen. Goat paths led all the way to the bottom of this ravine. Luckily for me, I soon saw a small gully, probably left after a spring waterfall. I safely descended along it to the bottom of the ravine. Here at our feet there flowed pure, clear water, but the channel was quite narrow and we crossed it without any difficulty. At once there began a steep upgrade, and we began to ascend by a narrow, winding trail. We had to stop two or three times to rest while we were climbing. But what is this water in fenced-off reservoirs? How could it be here on such a steep slope?!

We looked, and before us ran one thin, trickling stream, then another, and yonder a third, forming a tiny waterfall. This was excellent spring water, pure as crystal, ever so tasty, without any impurities or odor. We climbed upwards and glanced back. The sun departed beyond the horizon, the scarlet of the clouds died down and the evening twilight softly stole upon the earth. O Lord, O Lord—I thought—if only this earthly beauty would enchain my heart forever to the contemplation of eternal, unfading beauty! Scenes from sacred history swept over my mind one after another.... The valley of the Jordan and Mount Tabor.... I could not hold back and began to sing, "Thou hast gone up into Tabor ...Thy three disciples sing, Thou hast gone up into Tabor...." Grateful to the Lord with our whole heart and soul we turned to continue our journey. But it was already nearing its end, since we had reached the outskirts of the village which, by their intricate zigzag paths, led us to the center of the settlement. A simple village fence—made of long sticks, behind which there rose up so very high the tops of fragrant hemp. The air, scorched by the daytime sun, had not yet managed to cool down, and thus was wholly filled with the sweet, fragrant scent of hemp, which I greatly love.

Describing the beauty I saw, I relive it afresh and feel that joy and gratitude to the Lord for the great consolation He has granted me. And all of this is due to the care for me of my dear fathers. May they be granted the Kingdom of Heaven! Two years ago Elder Nektary's grave was accidentally dug up. His white clothing and socks had decayed, but his body was white. Peace be to thy dust, dear Batiushka!

Glossary

Akathist: a special, lively service to Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, or a saint during which one should stand; literally, "not sitting."

All-night Vigil: a service sung on the eve of a special feast; it is usually comprised of Vespers, Matins, and the First Hour.

analogion: an icon stand or stand upon which the Book of the Holy Gospels is placed or read.

antiphon: a Psalm, hymn or prayer sung in alternate parts. Also a verse or verses sung as a prelude or conclusion to some part of a service.

archimandrite: the highest rank conferred upon a priest-monk.

Batiushka: an endearing term for a priest or a monk. The first syllable is accented.

Canon: a set of hymns and verses sung to a particular saint or in honor of a feast; a rule or decree of a historic church council.

canonarch: the person who during Divine Services chants out verses, one line at a time, which are then repeated by the choir.

catechumen: one undergoing training and instruction in preparation for Baptism.

catholicon: the main church of a monastery.

cell: room or dwelling place of a monastic.

cliros: the place in church where the services are read and sung.

coenobium: a monastery in which monastics live a common life under an abbot or abbess.

cuffs: wrist bands worn by priests during particular services when holy objects are to be handled.

epitrachelion: a vestment that hangs from the neck of the priest and is the one indispensable vestment for all priestly ministrations.

hermitage: a monastic dwelling, traditionally of a solitary monastic, but often used interchangably with the word "monastery."

hierodeacon: a monk who is in the rank of deacon.

hieromonk: a monk in priestly rank.

hieroschema-monk: a schema-monk in priestly rank.

iconostasis: a screen partitioning the altar area from the nave of the church on which icons are placed; the "Royal Doors" and deacons' doors allow the clergy and acolytes to enter or exit the altar.

irmos (pl. *irmoi*): the opening stanza of each canticle of a Canon.

kamilavka: head covering (without a veil) worn by monastics.

kathisma (pl. *kathismata*): one of the twenty sections into which the Psalter is divided for use in Church services.

klobuk: head covering with a veil worn by monastics.

kontakion (pl. *kontakia*): a hymn used in the Divine services in honor of a particular saint or feast.

lampada: an oil lamp hanging before an icon.

lavra: a large coenobitic monastery.

Litia: a procession and solemn intercession at Vespers for special feasts, taking place in the narthex of the church. Also, the shortened Office of the Dead.

mantia: a mantle; the pleated outer robe worn by tonsured monks or nuns.

Matins: one of the daily services which takes place late at night or early in the morning. (According to the daily cycle it is scheduled at 3:00 a.m.) This service is comprised chiefly of psalms and a Canon of hymns which differ from day to day.

Matushka: an endearing term for a priest's wife or for a nun. Accented on the first syllable.

metochion (in Russian, *podvorye*): a dependency of a monastery, usually near or in a large city, for the economic needs of the monastery.

Moleben: a prayer service in which the faithful ask for heavenly help or give thanks to God.

nabedrennik (in Greek, *epigonation*): a diamond-shaped vestment worn at the thigh, given by bishops as an award to priests and hieromonks.

nameday: the feast day of the saint whose name one bears.

obedience: in addition to its ordinary meaning, it signifies a duty assigned and carried out as part of one's obedience to the superior or elder.

omophorion: outer stole used by Orthodox bishops.

Pannikhida: a service of prayer for those who have reposed.

Parastasis: a special, longer service for the dead.

Pascha: the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Patristic: of or relating to the Holy Fathers of the Church.

Philokalia: an anthology of classic ascetical writings compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Macarios of Corinth, inspired by and based upon the previous Patristic labors of St. Paisius Velichkovsky.

podrasnik: the basic robe worn by all monastics, including novices.

podvig: an ascetic feat, spiritual labor or, simply, Christian struggle.

prayer rope: a knotted rope commonly used by monastics and many Orthodox Christians in saying the Jesus Prayer.

prelest: spiritual deception or delusion; not seeing reality the way it is.

prosphoron (pl. *prosphora):* a small round loaf of bread prepared especially for the Divine Liturgy.

relics: pieces of bone or objects associated with a holy person, which are venerated by the faithful.

riassa: the outer cassock worn by tonsured monastics.

riassaphore: a monastic who wears a riassa but has yet to be fully tonsured a monk or nun.

riza: a metal covering used to adorn an icon.

samovar: a metal urn used for heating water for tea.

schema-monk: one who has taken on the highest and strictest monastic discipline, leading a life of seclusion and prayer. He wears the "schema," a special cowl and stole.

schema-nun: a nun who is tonsured into the "schema."

semi-uncial script: mixed upper-lower case script which employs a half cursive style, used for centuries in copying liturgical and Patristic books.

Six Psalms: Psalms 3, 37, 62, 87, 102 and 142, intoned by a reader in the center of the church at the beginning of Matins.

skete: a small monastery; usually a close-knit "family" with an abbot or abbess as its head.

skufia: a soft cap worn by monastics.

sticharion: vestment worn a deacon or an acolyte during Divine services. Also, the under-vestment worn by a priests when serving the Divine Liturgy.

sticheron (pl. *stichera):* verse of liturgical poetry which is sung in the Divine services.

Symbol of Faith: the credal statement of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, also commonly referred to as the Nicene Creed.

synaxis: gathering, host or multitude, such as a gathering of saints.

Theotokos: the Greek word for the Mother of God; literally, "the God-birthgiver."

tonsure: the rite whereby a novice is clothed in the monastic habit and becomes a monk or nun.

trapeza: the monastery refectory; also the communal meal in the refectory.

trebnik: priest's service book.

troparion (pl. *troparia):* a hymn used in the daily cycle of services and also at Divine Liturgy in honor of a particular saint or feast.

Typica: a service usually chanted in lieu of the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, consisting of the "Typical Psalms" (Psalms 33, 102, and 145, and the Beatitudes) with other hymns and prayers.

typicon: the order of Divine services. Also, the rules and ordinances of a particular monastery.

ukase: a decree made by a ruling bishop or a council of bishops.

verst: a Russian unit of length, equal approximately to two thirds of a mile.

Unction: the Sacrament of Anointing, usually for the sick or dying.

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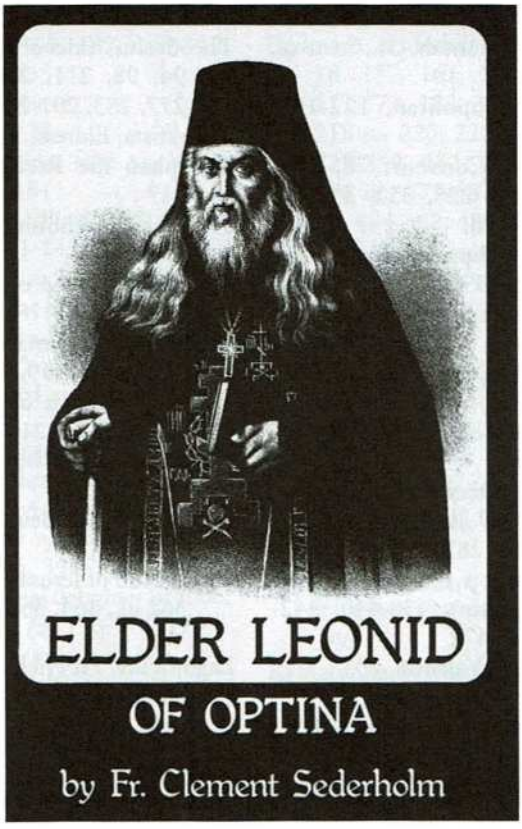

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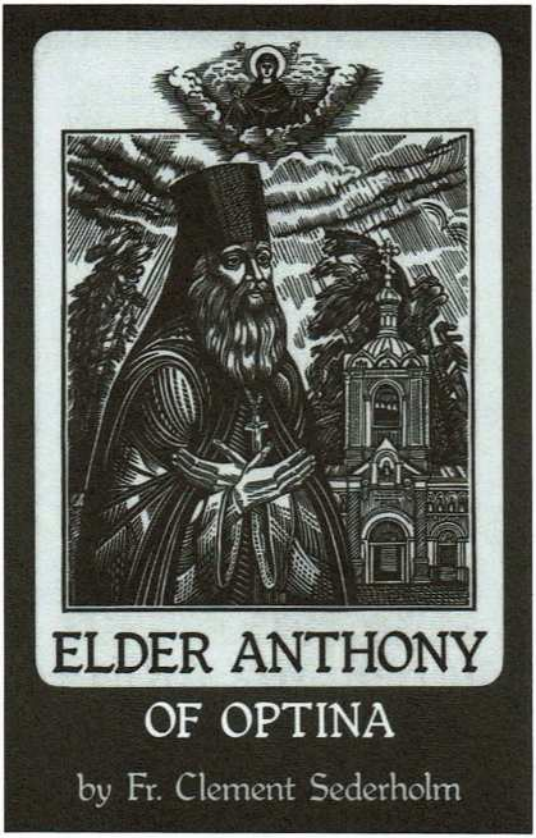

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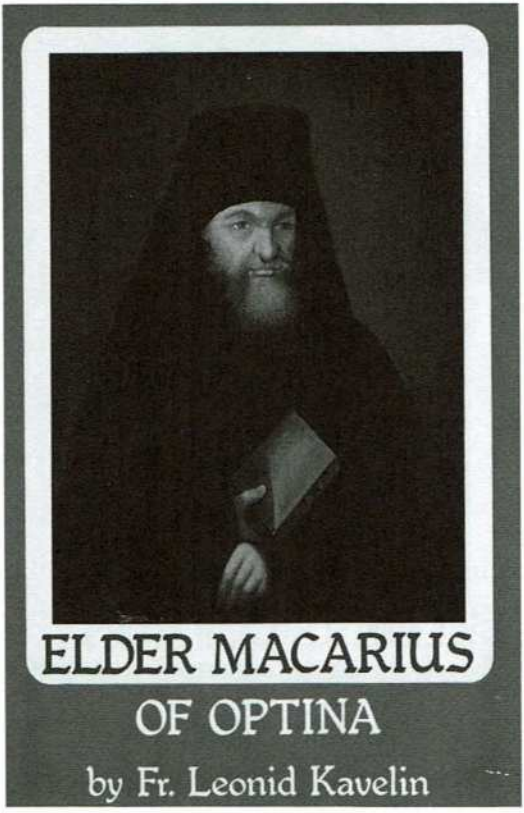

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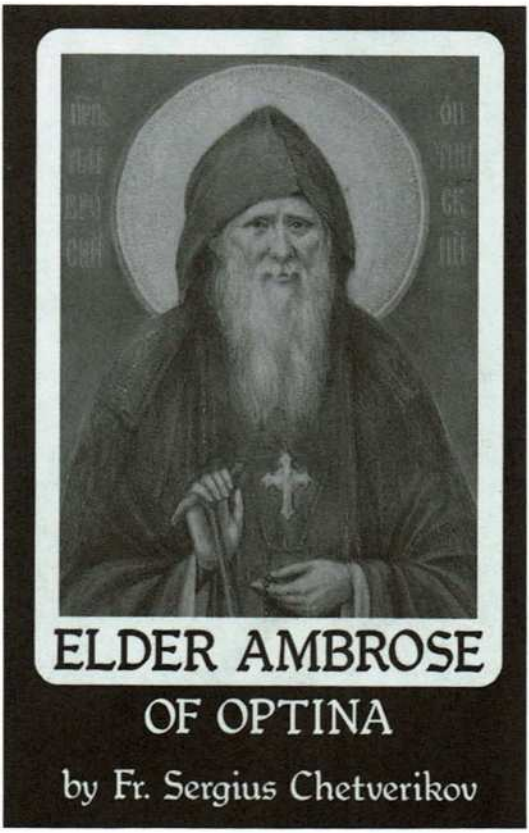

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